

VIEWS FROM ABROAD STREET PAPER ANTHOLOGY GROUNDCOVER

NEWS AND SOLUTIONS FROM THE GROUND UP

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SECTION ONE



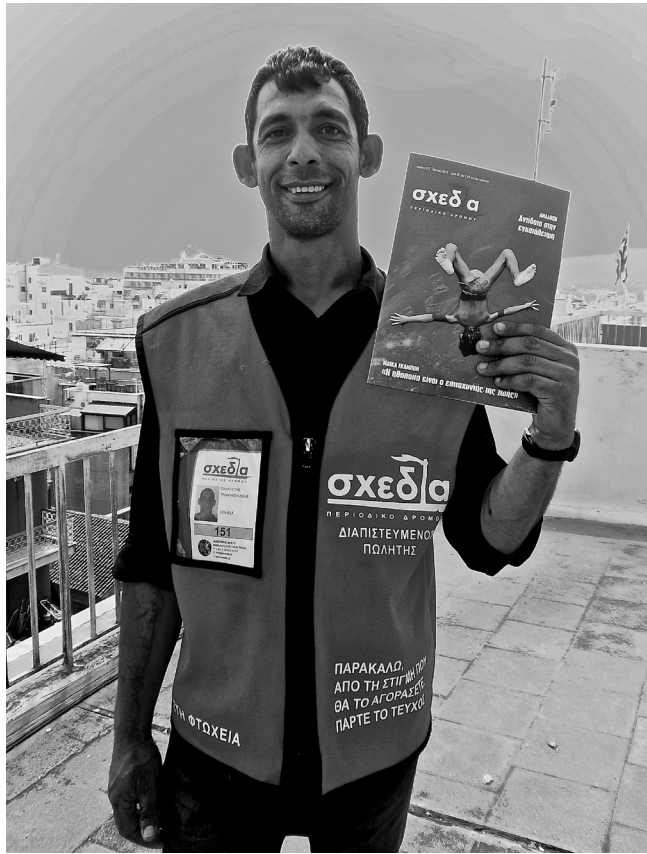
Vendor spotlight: Panayiotis Triantafillidis

by Staff Writer

Shedia – Athens, Greece, 9/21/2015

Panayiotis Triantafillidis, 35, is a Greek gypsy whose life has been transformed by selling *Shedia* in Athens. He's proud to sell the street paper and he can't stop reading it. His sales have helped him rent a flat. In this heart-warming account he tells of the racism, poverty, the loss of his father and other hardships he has overcome in life. "When I get home, one thing I do before I sleep is to think of *Shedia* and the people who gave me this opportunity. They are my second family."

"I come from Istiaia [a town in the north of the Greek island Evia], though I was born in Athens and lived most of my years in the area of Aspropyrgos. I am a Greek gypsy and this has caused me many problems in life. My father was a merchant, and I helped him in



Shedia vendor Panayiotis Triantafillidis. Photo: Shedia

several jobs. When he died in 2008, we were heartbroken. It's been so many years and I still don't believe it.

"I desperately wanted to leave home, but I couldn't because I had to look after my mother. She was very strict. She didn't want me to walk on the streets late at night because she was afraid that I would have trouble with the police.

It's common for us gypsies to face racism. One day I said I would leave the house and not go back. Since I was a child, I've dreamt of having my own home, but I could never afford it as I didn't have a regular, stable job.

"When I was young, I was in an accident and lost all of my teeth. That made it difficult when I was looking for a job, because people saw me like this and thought I was a drug addict. When I went to an area named Renti [a working class suburb], I got to know the neighborhood, and people liked me. I was taking care of dogs, feeding them and helping the neighbors. One woman let me stay in her house and allowed me to have a bath and a sleep there.

"Later I moved to the city center. I had no steady job but I had some money from helping in a kiosk in Syntagma Square. In return, the owner gave

me food and a small amount of money. But I had no friends, and was very lonely.

"One day, I noticed some guys with red vests, selling a magazine (the street paper *Shedia*) but I didn't know what it was because I didn't know how to read. I never went to school. I was sent once by my mother, but the older kids beat me up and stole my money so I never went back.

"I asked a vendor about the street paper. He explained to me what it is and how it works, but I did not quite understand the whole thing.

"In the meantime, I was working in a cemetery. At first I was afraid but after a while I got used to it. There were times when I was very hungry and didn't have a single cent for food.

"Once I met a group of policemen who liked me and helped me, but their views were quite extreme. They influenced the way I thought and made me feel hostile against asylum seekers and migrants, and be racist towards them. But luckily, I quickly understood that was wrong. I regret my actions; I was disappointed in myself. I never expected myself to be and think like this.

"One day, as I was walking down a central Athens street, I noticed a big gathering outside a place (a grassroots Migrant's Assistance Centre). I asked the people who were queuing what they were doing there and they told me that they were attending Greek language classes.

"I asked if I could myself attend and was told that they accept all people. That was the time my mind changed totally. I realized what I did wrong and how many good things we miss. With the help of a private tutor I quickly learned to read and write.

"One day I saw someone with a red vest again. This time, I could read what was written on it – "*Shedia!*" I asked again, I learned, I understood better. I visited the offices, talked with the people, and everything was explained to me in detail. This time I was really keen to start. Shortly after, I got a phone call inviting me to the office. I was handed the red vest and my first 10 free copies. The first day I went to my pitch early and waited until it was time for me to start my new job. It was an unfortunate day, as I had my bag stolen, but I did not give up.

"I saw that things were quickly starting to change and I was sure that I would make it. In two months I had saved a small amount of money and immediately rented my own small flat. Shortly after that, the people from the street paper helped me to fix my teeth. I was so happy and had energy to sell more magazines. When I get home, one thing I do before I sleep is to think of *Shedia* and the people who gave me this opportunity. Now that I am able to read, I cannot stop reading every page of the magazine.

"There are of course some people who do not like the magazine and say a lot of bad things about us. The worst someone said to me is that we are begging. I felt embarrassed, but I realized that not everyone can understand how important it is for me and how it has helped me.

"People now get to know us even more and I am very happy about it. People can see how I have changed. Even if, someday, I manage to find another job I do not want to leave *Shedia*. I will make sure that I make some time to sell the street paper.

"Sometimes I struggle to pay my rent, but I do not give up. People ask me about the people of *Shedia* and what I answer is that within this street paper I have found my second family. We do many things together and I am very happy, very proud and lucky that I joined this family.

"If it wasn't for *Shedia*, I would be a wild tramp. In *Shedia*, I have realized all the dreams I've had since my childhood. I did not expect it to happen but it did. And now I can dream even more."

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ *Shedia*

GROUNDCOVER MISSION:

Creating opportunity and a voice for low-income people while taking action to end homelessness and poverty.

Susan Beckett, Publisher
contact@groundcovernews.com

Lee Alexander, Editor
c.lee@groundcovernews.com

Andrew Nixon, Associate Editor

Contributors

Big Issue North
BISS
The Conversation
Hinz und Kunzt
Hus Forbi
INSP
IPS
Reuters
Shedia
Straatnieuws
SURPRISE

Letters to the Editor:
editor@groundcovernews.com

Story or Photo Submissions:
submissions@groundcovernews.com

Advertising:
contact@groundcovernews.com

www.groundcovernews.org

facebook.com/groundcover
423 S. 4th Ave, Ann Arbor
734-707-9210

Vendor spotlight: René Mocellin, Surprise, Switzerland

by Staff Writer

SURPRISE – Switzerland, 02/15/2016

“I must admit I was initially rather hesitant when selling the street paper, *Surprise*. I was afraid people would consider me marginalized, and I certainly didn’t want that image. Then I said to myself, I’ll do it my way. I don’t look like an outsider, and my equipment, such as my monitor and other extra gear, does not give that impression.

“I have now been with *Surprise* for almost a year. I started in March 2015. Nearly every day, I start at 10 a.m. at the main entrance to the Basel SBB train station and sell until well into the evening. And I have to say, I enjoy the task. I get a nice response from people, they like my electronics. I always have illuminated panels with me that I install myself. During Advent, I took a small lighted Christmas tree with me. That drew especially positive reactions. Once, a family of orthodox Jews passed by and the children were fascinated by the tree, just staring at it. Then I said loudly, “Hanukkah!” and everyone laughed.

“At the moment, I would like to keep my life’s story to myself. Not because I have anything to hide – quite the contrary. I am nearly finished with my autobiography. I hope to find a publisher in the next few months and release the work as a book. Until then, I don’t want to give everything away.



SURPRISE vendor René Mocellin. Photo: *SURPRISE*

“I have been writing the book over the last few years. Right now, I’m working on revisions. I have my own methods. I dictate the story onto tape, all in one go. It took me 12 hours to dictate 360 pages. In the past, I used a Revox G36 recorder, now I use a recording device with a chip memory card. After I record, I listen to it, making stylistic changes along the way. I have repeated this procedure 10 to 15 times now, and can recite some passages by heart. It is a very intensive encounter with my own life. Sometimes it makes me sad. In one scene, I describe how mother (who has died in the meantime) and I went out to a neighborhood restaurant for a snack. I remember so clearly how I went over to the Wurlitzer and selected a couple of oldies. My mother requested *Lara’s*

Song, the theme music from *Doctor Zhivago*. I see her sitting across from me with the song playing in my mind, and the scene comes alive, and that makes me sentimental.

Once most of the book was finished, I suddenly had a great deal of free time, being a disability retiree. And to be honest, I was bored. I thought to myself, you have to go out and do something, to get out among people. I had occasionally seen *Surprise* vendors on Clara Plaza. And that’s how I came to be with the street magazine. It’s difficult for me to stand outside from mornings to evenings. I have a hard time with that. Also, when I sell more-or-less well, I have to give up two-thirds of my earnings. That’s disability pension

law.

But it’s really worth the trouble. I have social contacts and despite everything, can even lay aside a bit of money. When I’m careful and, for example, do my shopping only in Germany, I get by rather well. It’s not enough for big spending, and I can forget about traveling, even though I would really like to take a trip to Cologne, Amsterdam or Berlin. I hope I earn enough with my biography, so that I can afford to go to these places.

As a matter of fact, in the early 70s, I once did something similar to selling *Surprise*. After my parents were divorced in 1962, the Guardianship Authority put me in a community home for six years. When I finally got out of there, I went to Alsace [a northeastern French region on the Rhine River plain, bordering Germany and Switzerland]. I earned my keep as kitchen help, scrubbing pots and dishes. A large part of my pay went for the dingy room the owner rented out to me. So I looked for something else and landed at a magazine that was sold to benefit handicapped children. Four of us drove through the villages and sold the magazine. We could keep half of what we sold, just like at *Surprise*. That was a lot of fun back then. And it is always amazing how things come full-circle in life.”

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ *Surprise*

Vendor dodges frostbite in 3000km trek across Sweden

by Jonas Füllner

Hinz und Kunzt – Germany, 01/25/2016

It started with an idea: a journey to the Arctic Circle, alone and on foot. Curiosity and the lust for adventure was what drove Torsten Meiners on. His motto? “Let’s see how far I get.”

The long-time *Hinz&Kunzt* vendor first attempted the trip one year ago. But after 10 days, bad weather forced him to turn back. Luckily, his second attempt was more successful.

The 50-year-old is fond of such adventures. In 2010, he hiked through Germany for many weeks. He wandered from city to city, to read children’s books aloud at elementary schools. This time, his travels took him to the outlands of Lapland, which is why he needed a good stock of provisions.



Hinz&Kunzt vendor Torsten Meiners. Photo: Stefan Nolervik

Along the way, Torsten collected about 5000 bottles from the side of the road, which he recycled to cover the greater part of his traveling costs. “While I

was at it, I gave Sweden’s roads a good cleaning,” he jokes.

Since Torsten didn’t have money for

hotels or hostels, he needed to take a weather-proof shelter. So he made himself a specially designed handcart that transformed each evening into a warm and cozy place to sleep. “Only my feet hung over the edge a bit,” Torsten recalls.

On foot or on roller blades, he pushed his 100-kilo cart through the landscape. To take advantage of the silence and solitude, he sometimes broke camp at 4 a.m., taking a longer break later in the day. This was Torsten’s secret to covering about 30km a day. “Many drivers gave my rolling UFO some mighty strange looks,” he says. Every now and then, a driver would slow down to talk to him.

When Torsten reached the town of Mariestad, a journalist interviewed him about his journey. The ensuing article

see **FROSTBITE**, page 12

Vendor Spotlight: André Christiansen

by Poul Struve Nielsen

Hus Forbi – Denmark, 11/30/2015

Nørreport Station is one of the busiest places in central Copenhagen. Buses, trains and the metro all meet there. It is also the place where many busy shoppers and commuters have noticed a man with narrow, square glasses and tattoos on his hands and neck.

Every day, André Christiansen could be seen sitting on the pavement with his companion – a dog named Odin, after the oldest of the Nordic Gods.

André lived on the streets nearby. For many years he held a cup in his hand. He begged for some change so that he could get by. But in 2013 a *Hus Forbi* street paper vendor, who used to hang around near the station, suggested something to André that would change his life.

“For four years I lived as a beggar. But one day the *Hus Forbi* vendors came to me and said: ‘You can do better than that!’ We have been colleagues ever since, and I am proud that I am not a beggar anymore. Now I have something to offer,” André says.

He and his faithful companion Odin have been together for three-and-a-half years.

“I was divorced in 2010. The ex-wife stayed in the apartment. Drink and divorce. That’s the story of my life,” he adds.

It is not the whole story, though. André’s life is also the story of how he lives in a triangle between the streets, prison and psychiatric hospitals. He has been in and out of institutions for most of his life.

“I was born mentally ill. I have three diagnoses of ADHD, OCD and PTSD. I have been married twice and I have three children with three different women. I drank alcohol as medication for many years,” André says. He is very candid.

On weekdays he spends the morning in *Hus Forbi*’s vendor café with Odin. Around noon he usually has a meal and then he says goodbye to the staff and the other vendors to go out into the streets near the station to sell *Hus Forbi*.

“I never managed to finish my education, even though I was training as both a cook and a plumber. Every time I feel almost normal I get ill. I drink. Emotions are difficult for me and it is a problem keeping jobs and marriages.



Hus Forbi vendor André Christiansen. Photo: Mette Kramer Kristensen

“I have been in psychological treatment since 1979. In 1988 I was convicted for robbery. I have been a criminal. I have been in and out of prisons and hospitals for a lifetime. But in *Hus Forbi*’s café I am allowed to be the person I am. Everyone else coming here has problems. I am not the only one so I am OK here.

“*Hus Forbi* has helped me get a decent life rather than being a beggar. I have something to offer to people now. I get in touch with more people. I talk to many people about the paper, the content, what it is like to be homeless.

“I consider the staff and some of the colleagues at *Hus Forbi* like family. When I am with the *Hus Forbi* family I can relax. I feel safe and comfortable. *Hus Forbi*’s café in Copenhagen is a better place for me than an apartment or a house.”

André adds that, come the start of November, he will not have touched alcohol for six months.

“I have decided that I want to stay sober for another six months. That is my new target. At first I decided to take a week without a drink and I have just added more and more time,” he says.

“When I am not drinking it means that I get my medication. Alcohol has exactly the opposite effect of the medication. Furthermore, I get aggressive when I drink. I am still an alcoholic but it’s been a long time since the last drink.”

Being part of the *Hus Forbi* family has also helped André reconnect with his children.

“Just the other day I managed to get a family photo with me and all three of my children. There is only one other photo with all of us,” he says.

“The kids are proud that I have come to where I am now. That I don’t drink. I had not seen the oldest daughter for four years. I know that I will lose them again if I drink. She did not like the way I lived. Her sister has lived in three different apartments. I have visited her in one of them only. She has kept in touch. She has come to see me in the street. But she would not allow me inside while I was drinking.

“The *Hus Forbi* staff have helped me when I have been down and low. The nurses who come as volunteers in the dispensary also help. One of the nurses, Jannie, who is a volunteer from Red Cross, has really helped when I needed psychiatric treatment. She has taken me to the hospital and she has come to see me during visitor’s hours. She was the one who helped me to get a hold on things again and to get back on my medication.

“While I was very ill, I got to interview the mayor for health in Greater Copenhagen together with a professional journalist. I confronted her with my situation and she actually paid attention to me and followed up on some of the problems that we meet as homeless people when we enter the psychiatric system.

“Sometimes it’s not easy to be part of the *Hus Forbi* family when you are an alcoholic and should not drink. Every other day one of the vendors will stop me and ask ‘Let’s get something to drink.’ Some of them do not understand that I don’t want to drink.

“Come February I will

have been in the streets for six years. I have an apartment for loan in four months. But I’m not sure I can be inside it. I am looking for a lodger.”

Living on the streets: a list of André’s possessions

Backpack
Sleeping bag
Sleeping pad
Odin’s sleeping bag
Toothbrush and toothpaste
Fleeces
Shampoo
Electric, rechargeable hair trimmer
Scout Purse (hip bag)
Non-aspirin substitute
Nail clippers
Needle and thread
Safety pins
Buttons
First aid kit
Multi Tools with screwdriver, can opener, knife, etc.
Extra clothes in winter
Food for Odin
Flashlight
Telephone
Headset
Small, wireless portable speaker
Taillight for backpack
Toilet paper
Wipes
Hand sanitiser spray
Dishtowel
Plastic bags
Ashtray
Cigarettes
Lighter
Drikkedunk (popular Danish brand of water bottle)
Water bottle for Odin
Odin’s water bowl
Cloth blankets
Hus Forbi street paper bag
Newspapers

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / *Hus Forbi*

Ivers & Rickelmann, CPAs, PLLC
2929 Plymouth Road, Suite 350
Ann Arbor, MI 48105

Phone (734) 994-7500
Fax (734) 994-0165

Thanks to GroundCover News for spreading the word and providing an outlet where there was none. We are proud to support your mission and good work!

Writing workshop in Bayern helps vendors bring their stories to life

by Reinhard Walcher, Toni Menacher and Wolfgang Urban

BISS – Germany, 03/14/2016

In a writing workshop ran by German street paper BISS, vendors in Bayern discovered how to put their stories to paper with support from journalists Lea Hampel, Christoph Gurk and Christine Auerbach. Here are some examples of their work.

Three King's Day Curling, Part 1

by vendor Reinhard Walcher

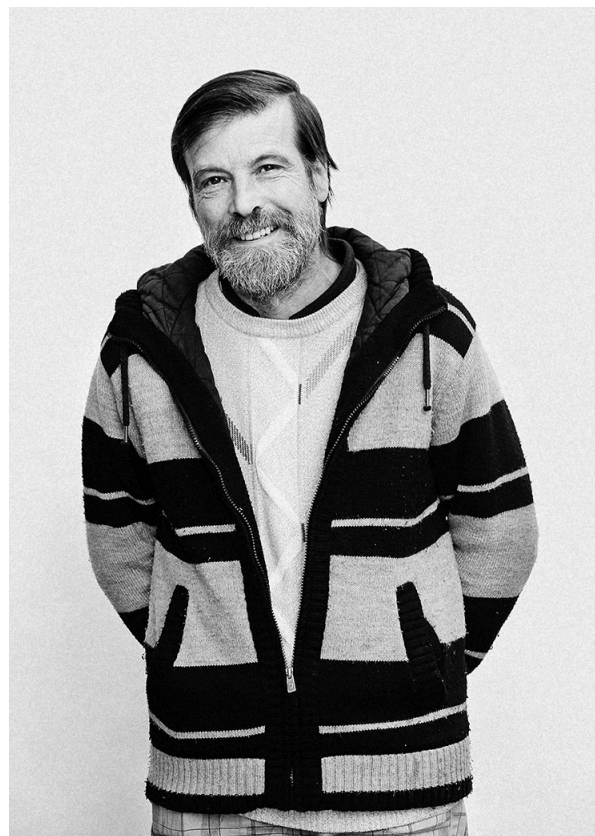
It was during my apprenticeship in a hotel in Brixen, South Tirol, where I was learning to be a skilled hotel clerk. One evening, it was shortly before Christmas, as I was picking up my weekly salary, the porter gave me a small piece of paper with a telephone number on it.

"You should call this number as soon as possible," he told me. Since I been in the hotel all day, I wasn't too eager to make this call there, too. So I went up to my room in the employee's wing and dressed warmly, leaving the hotel from the back entrance. Out, into the night. Snow was falling thick and fast. I pulled up my collar, put on my cap and began looking for a phone booth. I found one on the next corner. I dropped in a few coins and the dial tone came promptly. The man who answered on the other end was Michael, the youth sports trainer where I used to live and play German ice stock shooting [Bavarian curling].

"Good that you've called," Michael said, "I want to register you for the Italian Ice Stock Junior Championship." "Yes! Yes, do that!" I answered spontaneously. It was only after I had hung up the phone that I realized what I had done. I didn't even have a curling broom.

Back at the hotel, I spoke to the porter, who always seemed to have a solution for any problem. Thus, I learned that our kitchen porter, Hans, who also had a small bar, used to be an ice-stock player. I set off immediately and found Hans in his bar. He stared at me as if I was from another planet. I ordered a cup of tea and came directly to the point. Hans disappeared, returning with a sports bag. "I actually was about to throw my curling broom away," he told me. Curious, I opened the bag and what was in there? My goodness! An ancient curling broom.

Hans explained to me where I could train and suddenly I was in a great hur-



Reinhard Walcher. Photo: Sascha Klettsch, Barbara Donaubauer

ry. I wanted to try out the broom right away. Next to the city tennis courts was an ice field. There was a broom in the corner, so I began to sweep off the snow. Left, right, left, right, and soon I had cleared a lane. I immediately made a few test throws. I had laid my cap on one side of the lane, which then served as a home target. I was satisfied with my training and was hugely pleased – I had my very own curling broom... even though it belonged in a museum rather than on the ice.

On Three Kings' Day, with my broom in my bag, I set out for Montiggler Lake, where the Italian Ice Stock Junior Championship was to take place. With my thermos full of tea, I sat on the train from Brixen to Bozen. It was 5:30 in the morning. Looking out the window, I saw the contours of the snow-blanketed landscape, pines and firs bending under the weight of snow, houses only recognizable when their lights were on. I had another half an hour to Bozen, then I took the bus to Saint Michael Eppan. Shortly before the last stop, I got off the bus and power-walked for the next 20 minutes to be sure I was on time.

Saint Michael Eppan is my home and I know my way around very well. I was heartily greeted when I got to the lake. I was given a starting number, which I tied around my shoulders like ski racers do. After only a few moments, my name was called out on the PA system. I'll tell you how the competition turned out next time.

My first company outing

by vendor Toni Menacher

I thought a long time about whether I should go on the BISS company outing or not. At first, I turned them down because I thought an outing with so many colleagues and managers couldn't be much fun. As in any job, there are colleagues one doesn't get along with so well. I also wasn't sure how it would be going out with all the bosses. But two friends of mine, a married couple, talked me into going, arguing that it is important for me to get out among people and not always do everything alone.

As a matter of fact, it was a wonderful outing. It began with a nice breakfast at the BISS office. My colleagues were all in a good mood, and

during the drive to Chiemgau, I had a conversation with a colleague I had never seen before. I also spoke to the BISS managing director, Mr. Denninger, for while in a relaxed atmosphere. That was good, too, because it was the first time we had had the opportunity to speak about personal things.

The bird of prey demonstration was a truly unique experience. Watching how birds of prey power-dive out of the sky after bait is amazingly beautiful. As a great nature and animal lover, it was a wonderful experience for me. The pure, mountain air also raised my spirits. Later at lunch, talking and gossiping with old friends about times past was also very nice. On the ride over the Chiemsee [a freshwater lake in Bavaria] I had a long talk with two friends and colleagues I had known for many years.

We have known each other for over 16 years, and we spoke of the past and the present, of personal and professional things. Late that evening, we rounded off the day with a superb dinner. In the end, only three of us were left: Reinhard, Wolfgang and myself. A South Tirolean, a Viennese, and me, the Lower Bavarian. I hardly knew them, but we had a jolly time together. In wrapping up, I must say that I am still benefiting from the positive emotions and experiences I had during the outing, even though it is already a few months ago. I go out more often now and enjoy taking more frequent walks, for example in the wonderful Olympia Park.

Hopping mad

by vendor Wolfgang Urban

Lately I keep forgetting things, am frequently inattentive and don't look after my possessions. Last week, for example, I sat down on a bench in the subway station to quietly fill my pipe. I took my pipe case and tobacco out of my shopping bag and discovered a bag of dates someone had given to me. Their state of maturity called for immediate ingestion. There was about 500 grams. I ate three of them and threw the rest away; they were inedible. That was a shame, but after I ate the dates I thought it was time to go. I got up from the bench, did my shopping and went home.

As I was putting my things away, I discovered that my pipe case and tobacco were gone! I retraced my steps to find out where I could have forgotten them and remembered the subway station. I quickly slipped into my street shoes and ran to the subway station, but my pipe case was already gone. At first I was hopping mad, but then I remembered that I had brand new pipes at home. I had completely forgotten them! The same thing happened last Saturday. I had gone to the supermarket to buy beverages. I had parked my handcart in the entrance by the mineral water without thinking someone might take it. I packed my drinks in the shopping cart and paid accordingly. It was then I found my handcart was missing!

Cursing loudly, I shouted, "I could kick myself in the ass!" One of the customers replied, "I'd like to see that!" I looked around and asked the vendor at the bakery stand if he had seen anything. He told me a bottle collector had taken the handcart, assuming it didn't belong to anyone. There I stood, steaming. Where am I supposed to put my things?

I was moving to grab my shopping bags when I remembered that I had another handcart in my cellar. I hurried home to get it and that was the end of it. All in all, it wasn't so bad. I have enough, some things I even have more than one of. What bothers me is not so much that my forgetfulness leads me to lose things like pipe cases and handcarts. What disturbs me is the forgetfulness itself and my lack of control over it.

Is this Alzheimer's already?

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / BISS

A vendor's pilgrimage from Romania to Egypt, to the north of England

by Christian Lisseman

Big Issue North – UK, 11/01/2016

Every street paper vendor has a story to tell. But *Big Issue North* seller Nan's story is pretty special. The 54-year-old's life would be scarcely believable if it wasn't for his extensive journals and clippings. It's included staying silent for three years, walking from Romania to Egypt – and recently arriving in the north of England where he sells his local street paper. Nan takes a break from standing on his head (a favourite hobby of his) to tell his extraordinary story.

It's a sunny but cold afternoon on Market Street, Manchester in the UK. Among the shoppers and the newspaper vendors, the buskers and the people selling football scarves, there's a man balancing on his head and his hands, legs perfectly vertical. He remains there, poker straight, as the people of Manchester surge past, the odd person dropping a coin or two into the small bowl placed in front of him.

This is Stefan Nan, street showman, *Big Issue North* vendor, traveller, former monastic brother, athlete, yoga master, nutritionist and massage therapist.

He gradually lowers himself down to the floor, resting for a moment to let the blood drain back to the rest of his body. And then he jumps to his feet, flexes his shoulders and collects the coins from his bowl. While he was standing on his head a lad walked up, took a handful of change out of the bowl and walked off without a word. Didn't he stop what he was doing and chase after him? Wasn't he angry? "Oh no," he smiles. "I have money. Thank you, God. Money is necessary and if he needs it, that is OK."

It's a characteristically generous response and an attitude that has carried Nan through his varied and fascinating life. Every *Big Issue North* vendor has a story to tell, but Nan's story is pretty special. The 54-year-old has packed more into his life than most of us could in two lifetimes.

His attempt to walk from Romania to Jerusalem rates as one of the high points. Pulling a cart that carried everything he owned, Nan set off on 4 November 2001 from his hometown of Constanta, on the Romanian coast, on a near-3,000-km walk. He had 234 dollars in his pocket and for the next nine months or so he kept on walking. It was a mission of personal reflection, a holy pilgrimage – one he undertook in silence. "I didn't speak for three and a half years," he says, explaining that he



Big Issue North vendor Stefan Nan. Photo: Big Issue North

communicated with the people he met along the way by writing and basic sign language.

A tough journey got even harder as winter descended. "I headed south from Romania but it was very cold in the mountains and it snows every day there."

Spending nights in a tent, Nan crossed into Turkey and made the long journey down to the Syrian border, where he ran into visa problems. Twice he had to leave his trolley behind and head back to Ankara by bus to visit the Romanian Embassy. The second time he also had to spend a month working on a construction site in the Turkish city because he had run out of money.

Having walked 500km along the Turkish-Syrian border to reach a crossing point, Nan then had to walk back along the other side of the border, before he continued his journey down through Syria and into Jordan. When he finally reached the border with Israel, though, with Jerusalem just a few kilometres away, he was stopped in his tracks. Conflict between Jordan and Israel meant there was no way he could reach his intended destination.

So Nan changed course and instead carried on to Egypt, crossing the Sinai Peninsula on foot. "When I have no energy left, I sleep," he says of his journey across the desert. "I don't sleep in a hotel. Not a three, four or five-star hotel. I sleep in the hotel under many stars."

Finally, he reached Cairo. "I go to the pyramids, Alexandria, Valley of the Kings, Luxor and the Aswan Dam. I go to the Romanian Embassy in Cairo and they try to help me to get to Jerusalem but this is not possible because at the

Israeli Embassy in Cairo the Israeli woman writes a paper that says I can't go. So that is the end of that."

All of this might be impossible to believe were it not for the evidence he carries with him. There are his tome-like journals, written mostly in Romanian, interrupted occasionally with messages from people he'd met along the way. These are written in Arabic, English and even Aramaic. One entry reads: "I'm an Egyptian doctor, welcome you in Egypt mister Stefan, you're a great man. You can withstand the long and difficult journey to many countries on foot. Our God help you. Dr. Samir."

And then there are the newspaper clippings. There's one from May 2001, where a young-looking Nan prepares for his journey to Jerusalem, training in iron boots, which weigh five and a half kilograms each. In September 2001, he's looking dapper in a safari suit, his beard starting to show. And there's his cart, piled high with his possessions: a towel, a plastic container with water, his tent rolled up, a sleeping bag, his journal on top, all held in place with thin bands of rope. Here he is in front of a sphinx in Egypt, the beard even longer now, the journal under his arm, his head protected from the sun by a white cloth.

Nan flew back to Romania after nine months and 5,000km after leaving Constanta. There, he joined a monastery and two years later managed to make the long-planned trip to his beloved Jerusalem by air. There's another clipping of Nan in 2003, dressed in the black robes and skufia of the monastic brotherhood, holding aloft a religious staff as he sits in a Jerusalem church.

"It was wonderful," he explains, remembering how it felt to finally reach

the place that he had tried, with such effort and resolve, to reach for so long. "Beautiful."

How then did he become a *Big Issue North* vendor? In 2014, Nan came to the UK. "I did not come to get UK benefits. I came to work and gain prosperity. I want a decent life... I have a great love for learning. Although I am 54 in actual years, I am young at heart, have the body of a teenager and an open mind."

He names some historical British people he admires – Shakespeare, Lord Byron and Samuel Richardson [the 18th century writer and painter] – and then affirms his "respect for the Queen and the Royal Family."

Like many people, Nan started selling *Big Issue North* as a way of earning some money. Later he found work in a recycling plant, distributing leaflets and car washing. Then he started doing his shows on the streets of Manchester, demonstrating his yoga abilities.

Health and fitness are central to Nan's life. "When I was 35 I knew if I didn't change I would be dead. I was fat – I had a lot of problems."

Now Nan's dedication to keeping in good shape is an extension of his beliefs. "My body is a temple and I don't have permission to damage it. My body does not need piercings, tattoos, drugs, smoking or alcohol. If you disrespect your body, you are disrespecting God. God gave you a mouth to eat, not for smoking."

In May 2015, Nan joined staff from *Big Issue North* on the Manchester 10k to raise money for *The Big Issue* in the North Trust charity. He beat all the staff taking part, crossing the finish line in under 42 minutes. But then again, back in Romania, he'd been used to athletic success. "I am a double national champion – 1,500m and 3,000m," he explains. There's more evidence: the results sheet from the Timisoara Half Marathon in 2012, with Nan ranked seventeenth with a pretty respectable finishing time of one hour and 28 minutes.

Nan is now working on improving his English, taking two classes a week. "I want to learn English language, because I want to practice my profession, which is therapeutic massage. I want to teach English people about nutrition and to help disabled people using massage."

see PILGRIMAGE, page 11

Cambodian vendor on fleeing the Khmer Rouge and losing his family

by Diana Frei

SURPRISE – Switzerland, 02/02/2016

“In 1976, before I turned 10, I lived in a village in Cambodia. There were many rice fields there, and many mango trees growing in the area. One day I went for a walk and noticed a young tree that was still small and tender. Because it was so fragile, I dug it out and replanted it near our house, at a place where there were not many trees growing. I built a fence of wood around it to protect it.

“Shortly before that, in 1975, the Khmer Rouge had come to power, and I was about to be drafted into the army to serve the state. That is why I fled shortly after. I no longer had a home. Initially, I headed towards Vietnam. I was afraid of the soldiers. Of their guns. Of the violence. Of the shooting. I hid myself. If they had found me, I would have been made to fight in the war. In order to have something to eat, I had to steal. I climbed up trees. I fished. Later on, due to the war between Vietnam and Cambodia, I headed in the opposite direction, towards Thailand. I arrived there a few weeks later.

“In Thailand, I was taken in by an international organization. I was ill and had too much fluid in my body, and could no longer urinate. As an asylum-seeker, I was allowed to fly to Geneva. I knew nothing about Switzerland. In Geneva, I was treated in a hospital. A Swiss family adopted me, and in 1979 I received a Swiss passport. In Cambodia, I had been born under the sign of the dragon, and in Switzerland my star sign was Aquarius.

“In 2002, 26 years after fleeing, I traveled back to Cambodia for the first time. The entire family picked me up from the airport in Phnom Penh. My brother recognized me from the black spot on my forehead. In Cambodia, people believe that it brings luck. Everything is different now in my village. It is no longer as beautiful as it once was.



Sokha Roth. Photo: Lucian Hunziker

“Our land now belongs to my mother’s sister, who came there after the war. I cannot stay in Cambodia, as I would not stand a chance without my own land, and would be unable to find work. But I found the mango tree – it is now 10 meters tall and bears a lot of fruit.”

Surprise: Sokha, what does your story about the mango tree mean to you?

Sokha Roth: When I saw the tree, it made me realize how much my village had changed. When I was a child, there was no house on the piece of land where I planted the tree. Everything was flat, and there was nothing more than a few small trees there. At that time, I imagined that when I grew up, that would be where my home would be. My family had no mango trees.

Are your relatives still alive?

My mother lives together with two of

my sisters who take care of her. She is old and in poor health. A long time ago, she was beat up so badly during a family dispute that she suffered a head injury. She cannot work, she cannot cook, and she cannot wash herself.

Do you still have contact with your family?

Since 2007, I have had almost no contact with them.

Does that upset you?

I traveled to Cambodia two or three times. Each time I returned to Switzerland, my mother cried a lot. That was when my brother told me that it would be better if I no longer came back. My sisters do not really like it when I come, because then they have even more to do. Even my brother gives me the impression that I am interrupting his life.

Are they jealous of you because you came to Switzerland?

I don’t know. My family is very poor. There have been a lot of political changes in Cambodia since I was a child. The Khmer Rouge introduced communism and killed large numbers of their own people. They took me and made me work for them. I worked all day and all night, without anything to eat or drink. That is, until I fled.

The Khmer Rouge separated you from your family?

Yes, but not just me. They did that to the entire population.

Why did they make you work for them?

I am the oldest son in the family. And when the regime came to power, my father was the head of our village.

They chose you for certain tasks because you were of the right age.

Yes. Once, I was playing near our house, and two women from the military came. They were probably about 25 or 30 years old. They did not have any

weapons, but they wore uniforms. Back then, everyone had the same standard black clothes, but these women were wearing additional military components. They told me I had to serve my country. Serve the people. It was the first time that I had heard such words. Suddenly, I had thoughts of having to leave my family. I was afraid. I went to my mother, held her tightly, and told her what the women had said to me. My mother simply looked at the two women without saying anything.

Did your father have to work with the Khmer Rouge?

At the time, the Khmer Rouge had a peasant army in the jungle. In 1973, they gained control of the peasants and then took over the entire country. They came to the local communities, to the villages, and made the people choose. Either you were with them or against them. That meant you had no choice but to join.

Your father was put under pressure?

The village was under their control, and they chose me to work in the community. I worked for the postal service, and was tasked with delivering top-secret messages. Each morning, the boss gave me a letter, and each time I had to deliver it personally to a certain place several kilometers away. I hadn’t turned nine yet, and could not read. All I knew was where I was supposed to bring the letter. My brother once told me that what I was carrying were arrest warrants.

Why did you decide to flee shortly after?

I delivered these letters every day. The other children punished me for that, and I could neither sleep, nor did I get anything to eat. Suddenly I thought: I can’t do this anymore. Tomorrow, I will leave and never come back. I believe that the military searched for me, but I left, first heading towards Vietnam, and around a year later on to Thailand due to the war between Vietnam and Cambodia.

And then you were picked up by Terre des Hommes and adopted in French-speaking Switzerland. Did you have a perfectly normal childhood in Switzerland?

I was in Leysin in a Catholic nursing school, where I was picked up by my Swiss family. On Christmas, Terre des Hommes broadcast photos of all child refugees on television, after which we

see **KHMER ROUGE**, page 11

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Behind the refugee crisis, families in the West willing to pay and pay

by Selam Gebrekidan

Reuters, 02/29/2016

One Tuesday night in June 2015, Tesfom Mehari Mengustu, an Eritrean delivery man in Albany, New York, got a call from a number he did not recognize. On the line was Girmay, his 16-year-old brother.

Girmay was calling from Libya. He had just spent four days crossing the Sahara. God willing, he said, the men who had smuggled him through the desert would get him to the capital city of Tripoli within days. After that, he would cross the Mediterranean for Italy.

“Europe is within reach,” Girmay told his brother. But he needed money to pay for the next leg of his journey.

Tesfom, 33, was less enthusiastic. Four years earlier, he had paid \$17,000 in ransom to free another brother who had been kidnapped crossing Egypt’s Sinai desert. On another occasion, he had sent \$6,000 to a smuggler holding his sister hostage in Sudan. War-torn Libya, Tesfom knew, was particularly dangerous. That April, Islamic State militants there had executed 30 Ethiopians and Eritreans and posted the videos online.

Of those lucky enough to survive the desert trek, many never make it to Europe.

“You will either drown in the sea or die in the desert,” Tesfom had already warned his little brother. “Or worse still, someone will slaughter you like a lamb on your way there. I can’t let you do this to our mother.”

But Tesfom also knew his hands were tied. Girmay might be tortured by smugglers if he didn’t pay. He agreed to send the money and told his brother to call back with instructions. For weeks, none came. The phone Girmay had used went dead. By mid-July, a few weeks after Reuters began tracking Girmay’s odyssey, Tesfom doubted he would ever see his brother again.

Tesfom’s months-long effort to shepherd his brother into Europe – via payments that spanned at least four countries, three different bank accounts, and the use of three different kinds of money transfers – reveals the inner workings of the multi-billion-euro smuggling networks that are fuelling Europe’s migrant crisis.

Europol, Europe’s police agency, says people-smuggling may have generated between \$3 billion and \$6 billion last year. Most of the money for passage is raised and transferred by migrants’ and refugees’ relatives around the world.

The smuggling rings exploit captive consumers thousands of miles apart – migrants on a quest for freedom or



Migrants disembark from the Italian Navy vessel Cigala Fulgosi in the Sicilian harbour of Augusta, Italy, September 3, 2015. Photo: REUTERS/Antonio Parrinello

opportunity, and their families back home and in the West, who are willing to pay to ensure their loved ones make it.

Interviews with nearly 50 refugees, two smugglers and European prosecutors – as well as a review of documents released by Italian and European Union authorities – detail a sophisticated system built on an elaborate chain of dealers in Africa and Europe. The business relies on a trust-based exchange to transfer money without inviting scrutiny. Smugglers offer enticing group deals, such as one free crossing for every 10. During the summer’s high season, prices soar. A single boat crossing on the Mediterranean cost \$2,200 per passenger in August, up from an average \$1,500 a year earlier, according to refugees’ accounts.

Governments and law enforcement officials across Europe are trying to stop the smugglers. Europol says it and its partners have identified nearly 3,000 people since March 2015 who are involved in the smuggling trade. Italian police alone have arrested more than two dozen people whom prosecutors in Palermo believe helped organize thousands of boat trips between Libya and Sicily.

Sicilian prosecutor Calogero Ferrara has named two men – Ermias Ghermay, an Ethiopian, and Medhanie Yehdego Mered, an Eritrean – as kingpins in an organized-crime network responsible for bringing thousands of refugees to Italy. The men, Ferrara alleges, control an operation that is “much larger, more complex and more structured than originally imagined” when he began looking into smugglers. Both suspects

are still at large.

Ferrara says the kingpins are opportunistic, purchasing kidnapped migrants from other criminals in Africa. They are also rich. By his calculations, each boat trip of 600 people makes the smugglers between \$800,000 and \$1 million before costs. Another smuggler whose activities Ferrara has been investigating made nearly \$20 million in a decade.

Smugglers cut costs to maximize profit. They use cheap, disposable boats, dilapidated and rarely with enough fuel. They bank on Europe’s search and rescue missions. Some 150,000 people were saved in one year by an Italian naval operation that was launched in late 2013, according to United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. It was suspended in late 2014 to save money and has been replaced by a more restricted European operation.

If a human cargo ship does go down, the smugglers’ losses are minimal.

“There is no risk for the business,” Ferrara said. “If you traffic in drugs and you lose the drug, somebody must pay for the drug. If (the migrants) sink and most of them die, there is no money lost.”

So far, the networks have mostly eluded law enforcement because they are based on anonymous cells spread across many countries. Neither the refugees seeking smugglers’ services nor the families footing the bill are interested in drawing attention to how the networks operate. Girmay himself declined to be interviewed for this story.

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The steep price of immigration



Migrants wait to disembark from the Italian Navy vessel *Cigala Fulgosi* in the Sicilian harbour of Augusta, Italy, September 3, 2015. Photo: REUTERS/Antonio Parrinello

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Strained finance

Girmay was two years old when Tesfom last saw him in Asmara, Eritrea's capital. It was 2001, a decade after the country had won independence. Following a border war with Ethiopia that started in 1998, the Eritrean government had declared a state of emergency and indefinitely extended national service. Tesfom, conscripted right out of high school, deserted, borrowed 30,000 nakfa (nearly \$1,900) and paid smugglers to get him to Sudan. After he left, authorities jailed his father, a school teacher, for eight months and fined him the equivalent of \$3,000. Tesfom was later arrested in Egypt and sent back to Eritrea.

Hundreds of thousands of Eritreans have fled in the past decade, making them the fourth-biggest group of refugees to enter Europe last year after Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis, according to the U.N. refugee agency UNHCR. The Eritrean migrants interviewed for this story paid an average \$5,400 each for the journey in the second half of last year. That's nearly eight times the World Bank's estimate of annual per capita income in Eritrea.

A United Nations report in June 2015 described Eritrea as a "country where individuals are routinely arbitrarily arrested and detained, tortured, disappeared or extra-judicially executed." The U.N. accused the government of gross human rights violations that "may constitute crimes against humanity."

Girma Asmerom, Eritrea's ambassador to the U.N., said that was a "sweeping statement (that) does not reflect the reality in Eritrea."

In an interview in New York, Asmerom said people were moving to escape poverty. He blamed Western nations for encouraging Eritreans to leave by offering them instant asylum. The motive of these nations, he said, was to weaken and marginalize the Eritrean government in order to serve their geopolitical interests.

"The Europeans and the Americans are contributing to this dynamic of human trafficking and misery," he said.

Tesfom tells another story. After his forced return to Eritrea, he says, he served three years in prison for desertion, locked in a windowless dungeon for half of that time. He was then sent to fight in a border skirmish with the tiny coastal state of Djibouti. He deserted again, only to be held in Djibouti for over two years as a prisoner of war. In 2010, gaunt and gravely ill, he was granted refuge in the United States after human rights activists campaigned for asylum for Eritrean war prisoners. That August, he flew to Albany to start a second life.

In his new home, Tesfom spent hours in online chat rooms talking to other Eritrean dissidents and attended rallies in Washington and New York trying to draw attention to the plight of his compatriots.

Despite the distance separating him from his family, he says he still feels responsible for his siblings' well-being. In 2011, his brother Habtay tried to emigrate to Israel but was kidnapped for ransom and tortured by nomads in the Sinai desert. Tesfom negotiated with middlemen to obtain his release. Habtay is now 25 and lives in Israel.

Tesfom's sister Sara, 20, hired a

smuggler in Eritrea who brought her to Sudan, raised the price of her journey six-fold, then threatened to sell her to a nomadic tribe. Tesfom paid \$6,000 to send her to Ethiopia, where she lives as a refugee.

The payoffs strained Tesfom's finances. He says he was working 70 hours a week delivering pizzas and driving a delivery truck, to make little more than the rent and insurance fees on his Nissan Altima. He didn't expect to be on the hook for another sibling's escape.

But in late 2014, Girmay was thrown in jail after he dropped out of high school to evade national service. In May last year, he escaped and slipped into Sudan.

For most Eritreans aiming for Europe, Sudan is the first major stop. One way to get there is via refugee camps in northern Ethiopia. Thousands of Eritreans pass through these camps every month, according to the UNHCR. From there, travelers pay up to \$1,600 to get to Khartoum, the Sudanese capital.

Girmay took a different route, across Eritrea's western border to the Shagarab refugee camp in eastern Sudan. From there, he called his parents to ask for money to pay smugglers who could get him past checkpoints on the road to Khartoum.

"My father was distraught," Tesfom said. "He told me, 'I should have never let you leave. I could have had all my children here with me.'"

Tesfom was angry, too, but he couldn't leave his brother stranded. He got a friend in Sudan to buy \$200 in pre-paid cell phone minutes and text the code to his brother. Pre-paid mobile minutes are used as currency in many parts of Africa, especially in places where banks are scarce or mistrusted. Girmay could easily exchange the minutes for cash.

Then, Tesfom called Girmay and urged him to join their sister in Ethiopia. Girmay had his heart set on Europe. The brothers fought over the phone.

"If you listen to me, I'll help you," Tesfom chided his brother. "If you don't, you'll be on your own just as you were when you left home."

At first, Tesfom thought he had won the argument. He agreed when Girmay asked him to send money to Khartoum, the financial hub through which much of the money in the trade is routed.

The main payment system for smugglers in Khartoum is hawala. Hawala depends on close personal relationships between people often separated by vast distances. There are no signed contracts, and few transactions are recorded in ledgers.

Instead, an agent, often in a Western country, accepts a deposit and calls or emails a counterpart in Khartoum to say how much money has been received. The agent in Khartoum then pays out that sum to the person being sent the money, minus a transaction fee and often at a better exchange rate than a bank would offer. The two agents eventually settle their transactions through banks. Although informal, it is a legal way of transferring money and is most used by Asian and African immigrants in the West. Italian investigators say smugglers use hawala transfers for 80 percent of their transactions.

In late May, Tesfom withdrew \$1,720 – all that was left in his Bank of America account – and went to a Sudanese hawala agent in Schenectady, New York. The agent kept \$120 in service fees and told his counterpart in Khartoum that a deposit had been made in New York. The man in Khartoum then paid Girmay 8.30 Sudanese pounds for every dollar, 40 percent better than what banks were offering that day.

It is not clear whether the agent in Schenectady, whom Tesfom declined to identify, or others in the business are knowing or unwitting participants in the smuggling trade.

"The agents provide the service with no moral judgment. What people eventually do with the money is up to them," said Gianluca Iazzolino, a University of Edinburgh researcher who studies Somali hawala networks in Nairobi.

Once Girmay had the money, according to his brothers, he searched for a smuggler in Khartoum and found a man named Tsegay. Middlemen like Tsegay, who often go by their first name to shield their identity, are trusted by refugees trying to cross the Sahara. They work with Sudanese and Libyan partners who have cleared the route ahead. Their best asset is a reputation – deserved or otherwise – as honest men and women who speak the languages of the people they serve, share the same religion, and often hail from the same towns and villages. They hire people called "feeders" to advertise their safety

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Refugee Crisis

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records and to recruit new arrivals.

The feeders usually work in businesses, such as home rentals and catering, that are likely to bring them into contact with new arrivals. They promote smugglers, who pay them a retainer fee, and set up deals between refugees and smugglers. Sometimes, they hold smugglers' fees in escrow until refugees reach Libya. Recent refugees, in fact, say they only dealt with feeders and never negotiated directly with smugglers.

In Khartoum, Tsegay arranged for Girmay and 300 others to cross into Libya for \$1,600 a person. On the edge of the desert, the refugees were handed over to Libyan smugglers, Girmay told his brother on the phone.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) says the Sahara crossing is at least as deadly as the Mediterranean, although most incidents go unreported. Some refugees fall off their trucks and are left behind as their column races through the desert. Accidents are common. But the biggest problem is dehydration.

"For two days and one night we had no food and no water," said Gebreselassie Weush, an Eritrean refugee interviewed in Catania, Italy, after he crossed the Sahara in August. "We had to drink our own urine."

Gunmen prowl the desert looking for human chattel. One Eritrean asylum seeker in Germany said tribesmen kidnapped his group and sold him for \$500 to a military chief in Sabha, Libya. He was tortured for months because his family could not afford the \$3,400 ransom the chief demanded. The women in his group, he said, were raped every time they were sold to a new owner. He escaped when fighting broke out in the city.

Because the desert journey is so perilous, smugglers let refugees withhold payment until they get to Ajdabiya, a town in northeastern Libya. Ajdabiya is dotted with abandoned buildings and barns where smugglers jail the migrants until everyone has arranged for their fare to be paid.

Some smugglers give refugees smartphones with apps like Viber, Skype and WhatsApp so they can get in touch with their families. The apps save money on international calls, and, more important, circumvent police wiretaps.

Some families quickly settle the debt

once they are satisfied their relative is alive. For others, the phone call is the first time they learn a loved one is in Libya. Freweini, an Eritrean in Denmark, was startled when her younger brother called her from Ajdabiya in May, begging her to save him.

"They said they'll hand me over to the Islamic State unless I pay them," he told Freweini, who asked that her last name not be used because she still has family in Eritrea.

She had four days to send the money, so she called friends and asked how she could get the sum to Sudan. One of them led her to a man who runs a spice store in Copenhagen. The spice merchant met her on a busy street corner, where she gave him 28,000 krone (about \$4,135) to send to his agent in Sudan. He laughed her off when she asked for a receipt. A few days later, the shopkeeper called back and said she was 2,000 krone short, so they met again.

Three weeks later, her brother crossed the Mediterranean. He is now seeking asylum in Germany.

The long wait

When Girmay failed to get in touch after his June call, his brothers tried to find out what happened, spurred by anxious calls from their mother. Habtay, the 25-year-old living in Israel, sent Tesfom a text on Viber with a number for Tsegay, the smuggler in Khartoum.

Tesfom contacted Tsegay that week. The smuggler was brief but reassuring. Girmay would be in Tripoli in two days, Tsegay said, and promised to call back with more details. That night, Tsegay disconnected his phone. He did not answer repeated calls from Reuters.

Desperate, Girmay's older brothers called people they knew in Sudan and Libya. Someone said there were three trucks in Girmay's convoy, but that only two had arrived in Tripoli. One smuggler told Tesfom to be patient; someone would eventually end up calling him for ransom.

Libyan militants routinely round up refugees and hold them in detention camps until they, or their families abroad, pay for their release. The price ranges from \$1,200 to \$3,400. This is such common practice that an Eritrean smuggler, whose phone calls were wiretapped by Italian police in 2013 as part of prosecutor Ferrara's

investigation, described negotiations with abductors as a routine part of his job.

"I tell (the refugees) before I send them off ... if you fall off the car and you break your legs, that is God's doing," the smuggler, who goes by the name John Mahray, said on a recording of the call reviewed by Reuters. "The roads may get blocked, and that is God's doing. But if you're kidnapped and if they ask you for more money, that is my responsibility because... I will pay all the money I have to secure your freedom."

To prepare for the ransom demand he assumed was coming, Tesfom borrowed money in July and sent \$3,000 to his brother in Israel. In two days, his brother confirmed that the sum, minus a service fee, had been deposited into his account in Tel Aviv.

"Tell me if he's dead"

In July, a month after Girmay's disappearance, there was still no word from him. Tesfom found the uncertainty unbearable. At night, he replayed their last conversation in his mind and regretted his angry words. The hardest part was hearing the pleas of his mother in Eritrea. "Tell me if he's dead," she kept asking. Tesfom stopped answering her calls.

Then, one Friday morning in mid-August, Girmay called Tesfom from Tripoli. He said he had been captured by a militia. He escaped when fighting broke out near where he was being held, and walked for days until he reached the city. He had not eaten in two days.

After some back and forth, the brothers decided that Girmay should hand himself over to a well-known Eritrean smuggler living in Libya called Abusalam.

The Eritrean exodus has been good for men like Abusalam. In unfamiliar territory, refugees tend to trust their fellow countrymen. Abusalam and his colleagues were once migrants themselves but never moved on from Libya. They liaise with hawala agents and Libyan suppliers of boats and transit papers. Reuters could not reach Abusalam for comment.

It is unclear who in Libya controls the business of shipping migrants across the sea. It is a well-established trade, pre-dating the fall of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. According to an Italian police investigation in the mid-

2000s, five Libyan clans dominated the trade from bases in Tripoli and Zuwara, a small city on the Mediterranean. Some were former agents of Libyan secret services. Most had farms that doubled as holding cells for refugees before they departed for Europe.

A security vacuum in the wake of Gaddafi's overthrow disrupted the status quo, said Paola Monzini, who has studied the Mediterranean smuggling business for more than a decade.

"Militias can give protection to anyone so it has become easy to get into the business," Monzini said. "But from what I have seen, Libyans still control the sea departures."

After the brothers paid \$2,200 in boat-passing fees, Abusalam sent Girmay to a holding cell by the sea where other Eritrean and Ethiopian refugees awaited a vessel. Migrants are assigned numbers so that smugglers can keep track of who has paid and who has not. They are also assigned places on the boat: above deck, where the chances of surviving are the highest, and below deck, where any shipwreck means near-certain death.

In the days before Girmay set out across the Mediterranean, Libya and its shores were becoming more dangerous. A boat sank near Zuwara and hundreds of bodies washed ashore. In 2015, an estimated 3,800 people drowned or went missing while crossing the sea, according to the IOM. About 410 more died or disappeared this year.

On the first Wednesday in September, at approximately 1 a.m., Girmay crammed into a small boat with 350 others, according to the accounts of two refugees on the trip. Within hours, the boat was spotted by rescue ships. The next day, he landed in Italy.

Girmay made his way quickly up Italy, into Germany, and then on to Sweden. He is now seeking asylum there, according to his brother.

Around the time Girmay arrived in Italy, his father in Eritrea was thrown in jail again. He was reportedly arrested at a hawala agent's place while receiving money Tesfom had sent from New York. Two weeks later, he was released on a 200,000 nakfa (nearly \$12,360) bail.

"That is the thing about our suffering," Tesfom said. "It knows no beginning or no end."

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / Reuters

Fleeing the Khmer Rouge

continued from page 7

were all placed with Swiss families. I went to school in the French-speaking part of Switzerland.

Did you have siblings in the family who adopted you?

Yes, two sisters and a brother. All of them were very musically inclined. My brother studied medicine and became a doctor.

Did you get along with them?

I was the youngest. They played music in the house, and I worked in the garden. My father had lots of pigeons and rabbits and a big garden with vegetables. I did my homework, and when I was done, I took care of the pigeons and rabbits.

Would you rather have played the piano instead of doing garden work?

Yes, only a few songs (laughs). Just a little...

Did you feel at home in the family?

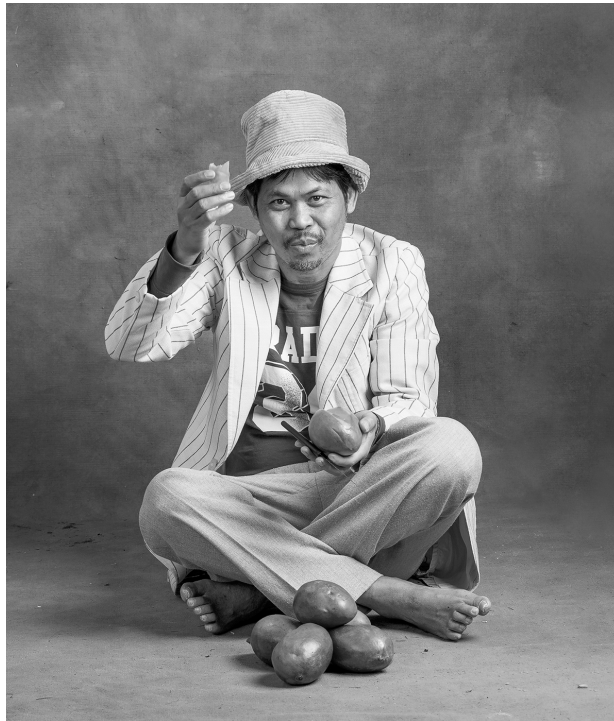
My father punished me too often. Sometimes he reacted strangely. Once, a representative of Terre des Hommes came to visit me and evaluate the situation. He saw the beautiful house with the garden. But my Swiss parents often confined me in the house. I was not allowed to go out and had the feeling that I was suffocating. In Cambodia, I was outdoors a lot. For a few months, I had to stay at home all the time. I felt like a prisoner.

So they didn't treat you like you were their own child?

I don't know. Later, my father once asked me: Do you love our family? I said no, and he hit me.

Have you lost contact with that family?

Yes, for a while now. Actually I do love



Sokha Roth. Photo: Lucian Hunziker

that family, and I thought that maybe we could share a meal once a year. But that was clearly never the plan. My father wanted all his children to do well in school and pass the exams, that much was clear to me. But he also said: When you're grown up, I want you to keep your distance. You will have your own life.

Would you like to return to Cambodia?

I would love to return to Cambodia when I'm old. But where? I no longer have a real home there.

Planting a mango tree: was that a piece of home for you?

Yes. Many Cambodians create a real paradise for themselves outdoors. These are places that you can't really see from the outside. You have to go into the garden. It's a stunning place. The people there do not have much money, but they have a beautiful landscape, and they live in harmony with nature. Full of life. That was how I always imagined the future. As the beginning of paradise.

The Khmer Rouge's regime of terror

Forty years ago, on 17 April, 1975, the Khmer Rouge took Phnom Penh, the capital city of Cambodia. What

followed was a reign of terror that lasted more than three years.

After years of civil war, the people of Phnom Penh initially rejoiced, believing that they had been saved by the Khmer Rouge, a Maoist-nationalist guerrilla movement. But the Khmer Rouge's actual goal was the use of violence to subject the people to agrarian communism, and that was when their reign of terror began, ultimately resulting in the deaths of two million people.

The Khmer Rouge turned the country into a vast labor and prison camp where the people were worked to death and lived under constant surveillance. They forced the rural population to

support them. Villages were divided up into communist cooperatives, and all communications between the communities were strictly monitored. Families were split up into various work brigades, and children were even used to keep tabs on their own parents.

One sobering fact which has gained worldwide notoriety are the Killing Fields, which refer to around three hundred locations in Cambodia where at least 200,000 of their own people were murdered – with the goal of introducing a form of communism that aimed to eliminate ownership and need.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ SURPRISE

A pilgrimage from Romania to Egypt



Big Issue North vendor Stefan Nan. Photo: Big Issue North

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He also has plans for another long-distance walk, this time from his current home in Bolton to Africa.

"I might do this next year," he ponders out loud, the way other people ponder taking a flight to Spain for their holidays. He plans to take his journals with him when he goes.

But now it's time to get back to his street show, and then it's back to his pitch at Victoria Station to sell the magazine. "I am soldier for the Big Issue North magazine," he declares. And then he launches into a song,

raising his hands upwards, the melody sounding something like Jingle Bells: "Big Issue, Big Issue, Thank you Big Issue..." His song dies away and he grins widely.

He places his bowl down in front of his cardboard mat and flexes his muscles like a strongman in a circus troupe. And after a few breathing and stretching exercises, he drops to his knees and rolls over, then raises himself up vertically, his eyes closing in calm concentration as the people of Manchester rush on past him.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ Big Issue North

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German vendors: Carmen

by Jonas Füllner

Hinz und Kunzt – Germany,
12/14/2015

A few weeks ago *Hinz&Kunzt* vendor Carmen narrowly escaped death.

She had been standing for hours at her regular spot in front of Aldi in Lüneburg (a town southeast of Hamburg) trying to sell copies of the German street paper – without success. On the way home she started to feel ill. But instead of taking a break and at least having something to drink, she spent her last cents on a bus ticket. Never dodge the fare. But once home, she could not move. Her husband called an ambulance. The doctor diagnosed a heart attack – at the age of 39.

It was a serious shock – especially since Carmen's brother died of a heart attack at 27. Even so, she left hospital after only six hours. She did not want to leave Ionut, her 12-year-old son, unsupervised at home. And she was afraid of high medical costs. After all, she is not insured. The native Romanian says she already owes 4,000 euros, even though she never did anything wrong. "I pay for bus and no steal," she assures in broken German. She is unable to pay



Hinz&Kunzt vendor Carmen. Photo: Mauricio Bustamante

her numerous medical bills.

Carmen has been struggling with health problems for five years, ever since she was involved in a serious car accident near Brunsbüttel in 2010, in which she lost her unborn child.

But Carmen's life was not easy before the accident, either. She grew up in a small village in eastern Romania – a poor region, where there is neither work nor hope. An education was out

of the question. She did not even finish school. When Carmen was 14, her brother died. His children came to live with their grandmother and Carmen had to look after them. Thinking about her childhood still brings tears to her eyes.

At the height of the global economic crisis in 2008, she left the country. She tried her luck in Hamburg as a street musician first, with an accordion.

She knew how to play only one song. "Donauwalzer all the time," Carmen laughs. A rare sight, indeed. She was actually happy back then. She earned enough money for a room. With her health issues, debt increased. Carmen says, "I often cannot sleep at night."

Luckily she received a seller ID from *Hinz&Kunzt*. The sales of the newspaper secured her livelihood. But the worries continue, particularly for the future of her children. While her daughter Ionela has a family of her own now, the 22-year-old is unable to find a permanent job.

And then there is Ionut, the apple of Carmen's eye. The 12-year-old only started attending school in October. Why? "I was afraid," says Carmen – afraid that her son would be taken away from her because of her debts or that she herself would be sent back to her native country.

Only at *Hinz&Kunzt* did she receive help. Carmen has new hope. Her biggest wish: "Ionut should have it better in life than I had."

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ *Hinz&Kunzt*

Vendor dodges frostbite in 3000km trek across Sweden

continued from page 3

made him a minor celebrity. Drivers would greet him cheerily, encourage him and occasionally even give him money of food – all of which were greatly appreciated.

His journey covered around 3000km. Every stage became more arduous and time-consuming than the last. Finally, on 9 June, he reached his destination. The days were so long now that the sun only disappeared behind the mountains for a short time each night. But it was cold – ice cold. Frost lay thick on the ground, and without his equipment, Torsten would have been lost. "I was so excited, I could hardly sleep anyway," he admits.

The vendor spent one night and one day at the northernmost point of his journey. Then he started his way back. It would be another 1500km but it never occurred to him to give up, he says. He only became frustrated on the days he didn't make good time. On the early part of his southbound journey, Torsten felt downright inspired. "There was an explosion of green. In one week I experienced spring and summer together," he recalls. On his way home, the buds on the birch trees kept pace with him,



Hinz&Kunzt vendor Torsten Meiners. Photo: Stefan Nolervik

unfolding everywhere. All at once the entire landscape was in bloom.

Then one day, the rain set in. It was no longer possible to sleep. Each morning he massaged his cold, frozen fingers for some time. His mood was close to hitting a low point when he discovered an abandoned farmhouse with

a functioning sauna. "That was a true relief," says Torsten. And then the sun returned, and he was once more well on his way. One night, a great horned

"There was an explosion of green. In one week I experienced spring and summer together."

owl threatened him, circling above his head, and Torsten wisely chose another place to set up camp that evening. All the same, he felt at home in the wilderness.

"It's totally different than when I move

through the city. In the country, I notice what belongs and what doesn't." His experiences with nature and joy of hiking carried him many kilometers.

It also distracted him from a long-time addiction: he didn't gamble once during his journey. Back in Hamburg, Torsten had a weakness for playing on slot machines. In Sweden, however, gambling is strictly regulated. Torsten would have found a way to get around that. But he didn't need to. Instead, Torsten bet on his feet. "I didn't have the slightest desire to play," he says.

Shortly before reaching Gothenburg, Torsten finally decided that he'd had enough. He was gradually becoming aware of aches and pains in his hips and Achilles heel. When he finally boarded the ferry to Kiel, Torsten was relieved. He'd made it. But as soon as he reached Hamburg, he felt drawn back to the North. He had met three Husky breeders, and even received job offers. There was the promise of a new adventure; he could stay longer in the North. Torsten considered it for a moment and said, "The days are terribly short in winter. I don't know if that's really for me."

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org
/ *Hinz&Kunzt*

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GROUND COVER

NEWS AND SOLUTIONS FROM THE GROUND UP

SECTION TWO

Opinion: Feeding a warmer, riskier world

by José Graziano da Silva

IPS, 03/16/2015

Artificial meat. Indoor aquaculture. Vertical farms. Irrigation drones. Once the realm of science fiction, these things are now fact. Food production is going high-tech – at least, in some places.

But the vast majority of the world's farmers still face that old and fundamental fact: their crops, their very livelihoods, depend on how Mother Nature treats them. Over 80 percent of world agriculture today remains dependent on the rains, just as it did 10,000 years ago.

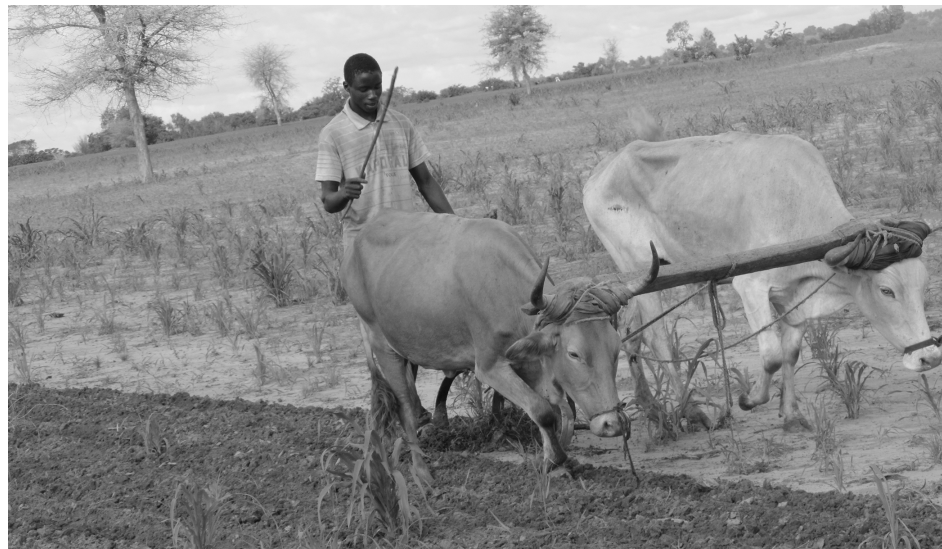
At the Second International Conference on Nutrition held in Rome last November, Pope Francis said: "God forgives always; men, sometimes; the Earth, never. Mother Nature can be rough – and she's getting rougher as our planet's climate changes."

When drought, floods, tsunamis or severe weather hit, the consequences for people's food security and economic well-being can be profound. Beyond the disaster-provoked hunger crises that make newspapers headlines, the development trajectories of entire nations and regions can be seriously altered by extreme events.

Remember: in many developing countries farming remains a critical economic activity. The livelihoods of 2.5 billion family farmers depend on agriculture, and the sector accounts for as much 30 percent of national GDP in countries like Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Ethiopia, Kenya, Mali, Niger and Mozambique, among others.

It is not only drought, floods, and storms the pose a threat to agriculture, by the way. Diseases and pests like Small Ruminants Plague (PPR), or desert locusts or wheat rusts do as well. Nor is harsh weather the only threat: wars, economic crises – the work of humans – frequently wreak havoc on agricultural communities and infrastructure.

Conflicts and natural hazards have al-



Padmamma in a seed planting centre set up by local charity Prakruthi in the village of Yeluvahalli, India. Photo: Simon Murphy

ways threatened food security. However, today we are witnessing their aggravation. Economic losses due to natural disasters have tripled over the last decade – and continue to rise.

Initial results from a new U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) study show that losses and damages to crops and livestock, fisheries and forestry due to natural hazards accounted for at least 22 percent of the total global economic bill between 2003 and 2013.

Small scale farmers, herders, fishers and forest-dependent communities, who generate more than half of global agricultural production, are particularly at risk. (By the way, these very same people make up 75 percent of the world's poor, hungry and food-insecure population.)

So how can we ensure food security in a world with ever more people, exposed to ever more intense and frequent hazards?

Agriculture itself can provide solutions. It is a main driver for land use changes and can therefore be instrumental in increasing vulnerabilities to natural hazards. At the same time, a more sustainable approach to food production would help us protect the environment and build the resilience

of our communities in the face of disasters.

Over the past decade, good progress has been made in fleshing out the concept of disaster risk reduction and its vital contribution to inclusive and sustainable development. Yet more must be done to harness the potential of agriculture in reducing disaster-related risks and to factor agriculture, food security and nutrition into strategies for bolstering the resilience of societies.

Next week [March 14, 2015], world leaders and the international development community will gather in Sendai, Japan, to chart a pathway for a broad-reaching and holistic global approach to disaster risk reduction.

The FAO will be taking the message to the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction that risk-sensitive development in the agriculture-food-nutrition sector is an essential building block for enhancing overall global resilience to disasters.

Our vision for ensuring that agriculture both benefits from and contributes to disaster risk reduction rests on four mutually reinforcing pillars that are applicable at the local, national, regional and global levels.

First, we must manage risk. This

includes developing legal and regulatory frameworks for risk reduction and crisis management and building capacities at all levels to implement them. Risk factors need to be systematically factored into agriculture, fisheries and forestry planning, from step one.

Second, we have to watch to safeguard, establishing better information-gathering and early warning systems to identify threats. Then we must be proactive and act before disaster hits. In the past, the global community received early warning of impending crisis, but did not react. The 2011 famine in Somalia is a recent and sobering example.

Third, we need to reduce the underlying risk factors that make farmers, pastoralists, fishers and foresters vulnerable. This can be achieved by focusing on – and investing in – more sustainable models of food production and the use of improved agricultural technologies and practices which raise yields and boost resilience against shocks while protecting the natural resource base.

Finally, maintaining a state of readiness to allow for rapid responses to the needs of the food production sector if disaster does hit is also key. Despite massive damage, agricultural livelihoods in the Philippines were rapidly restored after 2013's Typhoon Haiyan thanks to appropriate national-level preparedness and timely international community support.

Sendai – and July's development financing conference in Addis Ababa as well as the Paris 2014 climate summit – give us a chance to hard-wire resilience into the post-2015 development agenda. Agriculture – and the diverse communities that make it up – can and should be the bedrock on which increased resilience for millions of people is built.

José Graziano da Silva is Director-General of the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / IPS

Watch what happens when tribal women manage India's forests

by Manipadma Jena

IPS, 05/04/2015

Pradhan is a member of the 27-household Gunduribadi tribal village, working with her fellow residents to map the boundaries of this 200-hectare forest that the community claims as their customary land.

It will take days of scrambling through hilly terrain with government-issued maps and rudimentary GPS systems to find all the markers and determine the exact extent of the woodland area, but Pradhan is determined.

"No one can cheat us of even one metre of our mother, the forest. She has given us life and we have given our lives for her," says the indigenous woman, her voice shaking with emotion.

Unfolding out of sight and out of mind of India's policy-making nucleus in the capital, New Delhi, this quiet drama – involving the 275 million people who reside in or on the fringes of the country's bountiful forests – could be the defining struggle of the century.

At the forefront of the movement are tribal communities in states like Odisha who are determined to make full use of a 2012 amendment to India's Forest Rights Act (FRA) to claim titles to their land, on which they can carve out a simple life, and a sustainable future for their children.

One of the most empowering provisions of the amended FRA gave forest dwellers and tribal communities the right to own, manage and sell non-timber forest products (NTFP), which some 100 million landless people in India depend on for income, medicine and housing.

Women have emerged as the natural leaders of efforts to implement these legal amendments, as they have traditionally managed forestlands, sustainably sourcing food, fuel and fodder for the landless poor, as well as gathering farm-fencing materials, medicinal plants and wood to build their thatched-roof homes.

Under the leadership of women like Pradhan, 850 villages in the Nayagarh district of Odisha state are collectively managing 100,000 hectares of forest land, with the result that 53 percent of the district's land mass now has forest cover.

This is more than double India's national average of 21 percent forest cover.

Overall, 15,000 villages in India, primarily in the eastern states, protect around two million hectares of forests.



Women vigilantes apprehend a timber thief. Village councils strictly monitor the felling of trees in Odisha's forests, and permission to remove timber is only granted to families with urgent needs for housing material or funeral pyres. Photo: Manipadma Jena/IPS

When life depends on land

According to the latest Forest Survey of India, the country's forest cover increased by 5,871 square km between 2010 and 2012, bringing total forest cover to 697,898 sq km (about 69 million hectares).

Still, research indicates that every single day, an average of 135 hectares of forestland are handed over to development projects like mining and power generation.

Tribal communities in Odisha are no strangers to large-scale development projects that guzzle land.

Forty years of illegal logging across the state's heartland forest belt, coupled with a major commercial timber trade in teak, sal and bamboo, left the hilltops bald and barren.

Streams that had once irrigated small plots of farmland began to run dry, while groundwater sources gradually disappeared. Over a 40-year period, between 1965 and 2004, Odisha experienced recurring and chronic droughts, including three consecutive dry spells from 1965-1967.

As a result of the heavy felling of trees for the timber trade, Nayagarh suffered six droughts in a 10-year span, which shattered a network of farm- and forest-based livelihoods.

Villages emptied out as nearly 50 percent of the population fled in search of alternatives.

"We who stayed back had to sell our family's brass utensils to get cash to

buy rice, and so acute was the scarcity of wood that sometimes the dead were kept waiting while we went from house to house begging for logs for the funeral pyre," recalls 70-year-old Arjun Pradhan, head of the Gunduribadi village.

As the crisis escalated, Kesarpur, a village council in Nayagarh, devised a campaign that now serves as the template for community forestry in Odisha.

The council allocated need-based rights to families wishing to gather wood fuel, fodder or edible produce. Anyone wishing to fell a tree for a funeral pyre or house repairs had to seek special permission. Carrying axes into the forest was prohibited.

Villagers took it in turns to patrol the forest using the "thengapali" system, literally translated as "stick rotation": each night, representatives from four families would carry stout, carved sticks into the forest. At the end of their shift, the scouts placed the sticks on their neighbours' verandahs, indicating a change of guard.

The council imposed strict yet logical penalties on those who failed to comply: anyone caught stealing had to pay a cash fine corresponding to the theft; skipping a turn at patrol duty resulted in an extra night of standing guard.

As the forests slowly regenerated, the villagers made additional sacrifices. Goats, considered quick-cash assets in hard times, were sold off and banned for 10 years to protect the fresh green shoots on the forest floor. Instead of cooking twice a day, families prepared both meals on a single fire to save wood.

From deforestation to reforestation

Some 20 years after this "pilot" project was implemented, in early April of 2015, a hill stream gurgles past on the outskirts of Gunduribadi, irrigating small farms of ready-to-harvest lentils and vegetables.

Under a shady tree, clean water simmers four feet below the ground in a newly dug well; later in the evening, elderly women will haul bucketsful out with ease.

Manas Pradhan, who heads the local forest protection committee (FPC), explains that rains bring rich forest humus into the 28 hectares of farmland managed by 27 families. This has resulted in soil so rich a single hectare produces 6,500 kg of rice without chemical boosters – three times the yield from farms around unprotected forests.

"When potato was scarce and selling at an unaffordable 40 rupees (65 cents) per kg, we substituted it with pichuli, a sweet tuber available plentifully in the forests," says Janha Pradhan, a landless tribal woman, pointing out a small heap she harvested during her patrol the night before.

"We made good money selling some in the town when potato prices skyrocketed a few months back," she adds. In a state where the average earnings are 40 dollars per month, and hunger and malnutrition affects 32 percent of the population – with one in two children underweight – this community represents an oasis of health and sustenance in a desert of poverty.

At least four wild varieties of edible leafy greens, vine-growing vegetables like spine gourd and bamboo shoots, and mushrooms of all sizes are gathered seasonally. Leaves that stem bleeding, and roots that control diarrhea, are also sustainably harvested from the forest.

Reaping the harvest of community management

But the tranquility that surrounds the forest-edge community belies a conflicted past.

Eighty-year-old Dami Nayak, ex-president of the forest protection committee for Kodallapalli village, tells IPS her ancestors used to grow rain-fed millet and vegetables for generations in and around these forests until the Odisha State Cashew Development Corporation set its sights on these lands over 20 years ago.

Although not a traditional crop in Odisha, the state corporation set up

see **FORESTS**, page 8

Aboriginal knowledge could unlock climate solutions

by Neena Bhandari

IPS, 01/05/2015

As a child growing up in Far North Queensland, William Clark Enoch would know the crabs were biting when certain trees blossomed, but now, at age 51, he is noticing visible changes in his environment such as frequent storms, soil erosion, salinity in fresh water and ocean acidification.

“The land cannot support us anymore. The flowering cycles are less predictable. We have to now go much further into the sea to catch fish,” said Enoch, whose father was from North Stradbroke Island, home to the Noonuccal, Nughie and Goenpul Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who comprise only 2.5 per cent (548,400) of Australia’s population of nearly 24 million, are part of the oldest continuing culture in the world. They have lived in harmony with the land for generations.

“But now pesticides from sugarcane and banana farms are getting washed into the rivers and sea and ending up in the food chain. We need to check the wild pig and turtles we kill for contaminants before eating,” Enoch told IPS.

With soaring temperatures and rising sea levels, indigenous people face the risk of being further disadvantaged and potentially dislocated from their traditional lands.

“We have already seen environmental refugees in this country during the Second World War. In the 1940s, Torres Strait Islander people were removed from the low-lying Saibai Island near New Guinea to the Australian mainland as king tides flooded the island,” said Mick Gooda, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner at the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Global sea levels have increased by 1.7 millimeters per year over the 20th century. Since the early 1990s, northern Australia has experienced increases of around 7.1 millimetres per year, while eastern Australia has experienced increases of around 2.0 to 3.3 millimetres per year.

For indigenous people, their heart and soul belongs to the land of their ancestors. “Any dislocation has dramatic effects on our social and emotional wellbeing. Maybe these are some of the reasons why we are seeing great increases in self-harm,” Gooda, who is a descendant of the Gangulu people



William Clark Enoch of Queensland. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, who comprise only 2.5 per cent of Australia’s population of nearly 24 million, are part of the oldest continuing culture in the world. Photo: Neena Bhandari/IPS

from the Dawson Valley in central Queensland, told IPS.

Displacement from the land also significantly impacts culture, health, and access to food and water resources. Water has been very important for Aboriginal people for 60,000 years, but Australia is becoming hotter and drier.

2013 was Australia’s warmest year on record, according to the Bureau of Meteorology’s Annual Climate Report. The Australian area-averaged mean temperature was +1.20 degrees Centigrade above the 1961-1990 average. Maximum temperatures were +1.45 degrees Centigrade above average, and minimum temperatures +0.94 degrees Centigrade above average.

“On the other side, during the wet season, it is getting wetter. One small town, Mission Beach in Queensland, recently received 300mm of rain in one night. These extreme climatic changes in the wet tropics are definitely impacting the Indigenous lifestyle,” said Gooda.

Researchers warn that climate change will have a range of negative impacts on liveability of communities, cultural practices, health and wellbeing.

Dr. Rosemary Hill, a research scientist at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (Ecosystem Sciences) in Cairns, said, “The existing poor state of infrastructure in indigenous communities such as housing, water, energy, sewerage, and roads is likely to further deteriorate. Chronic health disabilities, including asthma, cardiovascular illness and infections, and water, air and food-borne diseases are likely to be exacerbated.”

Environmental and indigenous groups are urging the government to create new partnerships with indigenous

Australians in climate adaptation and mitigation policies and also to tap into indigenous knowledge of natural resource management.

“There is so much we can learn from our ancestors about tackling climate change and protecting the country. We have to transition Australia to clean energy and leave fossil fuels in the ground. Our communities don’t have to rely on handouts from mining companies; we can power our homes with the sun and the wind, and build economies based on caring for communities, land and culture that is central to our identity,” says the Australian Youth Climate Coalition (AYCC) communications director, Kelly Mackenzie.

AYCC is calling on the Australian government to move beyond fossil fuels to clean and renewable energy.

Indigenous elder in residence at Griffith University’s Nathan and Logan campuses in Brisbane, Togiab McRose Elu, said, “Global warming isn’t just a theory in Torres Strait, it’s lapping at people’s doorsteps. The world desperately needs a binding international agreement including an end to fossil fuel subsidies.”

According to a new analysis by Climate Action Tracker (CAT), Australia’s emissions are set to increase to more than 50 per cent above 1990 levels by 2020 under the current Liberal-National Coalition Government’s climate policies.

The Copenhagen pledge (cutting emissions by five per cent below 2000 levels by 2020), even if fully achieved, would allow emissions to be 26 per cent above 1990 levels of energy and industry global greenhouse gases (GHGs).

It is to be noted that coal is Australia’s second-largest export, catering to around 30 per cent of the world’s coal

trade. Prime Minister Tony Abbott has declared that coal is good for humanity. His government has dumped the carbon tax and it is scaling back the renewable energy target.

The United Nations Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) in its fifth and final report has said that use of renewable energy needs to increase from 30 per cent to 80 per cent of the world’s energy supply.

Dr. Hill sees new economic opportunities for indigenous communities in energy production, carbon sequestration, GHG abatement and aquaculture. “Climate adaptation provides opportunities to strengthen indigenous ecological knowledge and cultural practices which provide a wealth of experience, understanding and resilience in the face of environmental change,” she told IPS.

With the predicted change in sea level, traditional hunting and fishing will be lost across significant areas. A number of indigenous communities live in low-lying areas near wetlands, estuaries and river systems.

“These areas are important culturally and provide a valuable subsistence source of food, particularly protein, unmet by the mainstream market,” said Andrew Picone, Australian Conservation Foundation’s Northern Australia Programme Officer.

Picone suggests combined application of cultural knowledge and scientific skill as the best opportunity to address the declining health of northern Australia’s ecosystems. Recently, traditional owners on the Queensland coast and WWF-Australia signed a partnership to help tackle illegal poaching, conduct species research and conserve threatened turtles, dugongs and inshore dolphins along the Great Barrier Reef.

The Giringun Aboriginal Corporation and Gudjuda Aboriginal Reference Group together represent custodians of about a third of the Great Barrier Reef.

Elaine Price, a 58-year-old Olkola woman who hails from Cape York, would like more job opportunities in sustainable industries and ecotourism for her people closer to home.

“Our younger generation is losing the knowledge of indigenous plants and birds. This knowledge is vital to preserving and protecting our ecosystem,” she said.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / IPS

“Belfast Banksy” harnesses public goodwill in face of deadly homelessness

by Laura Kelly

INSP, 02/29/2015

A reclusive “mad inventor” in Northern Ireland is harnessing the goodwill of the people of Belfast to help the local homeless community, as they face a deadly crisis.

Good Samaritans from across the city have been leaving donations of clothing and toiletries in a set of “Kindness Drawers” that appeared in Victoria Street, in the centre of town, on New Year’s Eve. The drawers are unsupervised and rely on the kindness of strangers to provide essentials to vulnerable people.

People in need can freely collect anything they require from the set of 18 plastic drawers, which are decorated with messages of goodwill, as well as contact details for support services.

Formerly-homeless Belfast man Kris Nixon was approached by the individual behind the guerrilla project, in order to act as his spokesperson. The arrangement allows the inventor of the social experiment to remain anonymous.

“It’s just awesome how people have responded to it,” Kris said of the project. “There’s been no lack of empathy from Belfast people. The people of Belfast are so used to the bad news stories – not just the Troubles, but the constant political unrest here. We’ve lurched from one crisis to another. There’s a housing shortage – everyone knows this.

“Then all of a sudden, after the festive period, this little good news story pops up. And people think, ‘I wasn’t expecting that. It isn’t what I’m used to hearing – and I’ve got the opportunity to help.’ The people of Belfast have really taken to that.”

And it looks as though people are making use of the donations, too. “I’ve spoken to different outreach groups in Belfast and they’re seeing service users and rough sleepers talking about it. So, so far it’s going better than we expected,” Kris added.

The appearance of the drawers has coincided with a particularly hard time for homeless people in Belfast, as three rough sleepers have died in the harsh weather since the beginning of the year. A fourth man who had been sleeping rough passed away just after he had found housing.

Reacting on social media, Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland Martin McGuinness said he was “concerned” by the deaths, whilst homeless outreach



Dennis Kelly makes donation to Kindness Drawers. Photo: Sarah Kelly

charities called the situation “nightmarish.”

A spokesperson from Amethyst Outreach said the man who died most recently was a regular user of their services. “This is a nightmare,” they added. “I just don’t know what else to say here. This nightmare is never-ending.”

Kris and his family were homeless for two years in his mid-teens after they moved from his native Belfast to Brighton. During their time in England, his mother and her partner were struggling with a drinking problem – they “decided that the pub was a preference to paying rent.”

“For the next two years we moved from hostel to half-way house to B&B – anywhere the council can put you. Sometimes you’re there for three months, sometimes you’re there for two nights,” he recalled. “Especially at that age, trying to do GCSEs, it’s a complete screw-up of your system. I’d finish school for the day and I wouldn’t know where I was sleeping that night. I’d have to call my mum and say, am I going to the hostel in Brighton, or are we in a town 15 miles away?”

Kris is now a political activist on issues around poverty in Belfast. He hopes the Kindness Drawers can remove the barriers to accessing help that he experienced – and put power back in the hands of homeless people.

“Being helped is great,” he said. “Asking for help – you need to, but it’s a challenge. There was a part of me that felt uncomfortable – I wasn’t humiliated, but I was aware of the humility involved in it.

“There are lots of charities in Belfast

that homeless people can go to and ask for a sleeping bag, or whatever else. That’s great, but what if the power was in homeless people’s hands? To just come along and take what you need and that’s it. You don’t have to ask someone for help, you don’t need to look someone in the face and say, ‘I need something.’ You can just help yourself.”

Kris was able to confirm that the person behind the Kindness Drawers is the same man who made the “Homeless Pod” last year. A self-contained sleeping unit, it included a phone charging point and a radio, powered by a solar cell, and was left in the street in the same way as the Kindness Drawers. It received worldwide attention but was removed by the city council citing “safety issues.”

“There were quite a few people got in contact from different areas – from Canada, from Singapore, from the south of Ireland – asking for the blueprint,” said Kris. “But when the council took it away, people didn’t want to get into trouble. I can understand the council’s concerns but I don’t think they’re valid.”

Some remained undeterred. In Dublin, four similar Homeless Pods were erected on 15 February, by a group called #gimmeshelterIreland. “The action can be seen as an act of charity, but more importantly it is an attempt to provoke conversation about a huge problem in our society,” their spokesperson told Irish news site *Independent.ie*.

Of the man behind both Belfast projects, Kris added: “He’s a mad inventor. He makes things you wouldn’t expect, with the aim of helping people.”

At the time of writing the Kindness Drawers are still in place, though

Belfast City Council is yet to offer an official response to them.

“I know a number of Belfast City Councillors from working on various projects and they’ve been very supportive of it – across parties, which in Northern Ireland you don’t often get,” said Kris.

South Belfast DUP Councillor, Alderman Christopher Stalford, offered some words of support for the project.

“I welcome this initiative,” he said. “I sincerely hope that no red-tape or action from officialdom would stifle what appears to be a genuine effort by people to help the least well-off in our society.”

He added that, following the recent deaths, it is even more important that people help where they can. “In our city, the brutal reality of living rough has been brought home by the deaths of four people. These men were all someone’s son. They may have been uncles, cousins or even fathers. Those of us who have been blessed materially should do more to help.”

Local artist Dennis Kelly, a retired civil servant and current president of the Arts Society of Ulster, is one of the people to donate to the Kindness Drawers. He visited with his wife to drop off some good-quality winter coats that they no longer used.

“My wife and I had just bought some new coats. We would have normally put the old ones into Oxfam but we heard about this way of giving help directly to people who are living on the streets. We decided it would be better to put the clothing into the Kindness Drawers,” he said.

He compared the person behind the project to notoriously secretive street artist and political activist Banksy. “He’s doing something creative with this social experiment, which holds a mirror up to us as a community,” Dennis added, “and like Banksy, few people know his true identity.”

Though the Kindness Drawers are a positive way for people to help, they are clearly far from enough. The latest person to die on Belfast’s streets, a man in his 40s named online as Roy, was found in a doorway, just around the corner from the drawers.

“There is a real sense of public shame about these deaths,” said Kris. “Statutory bodies need to harness that to provide a holistic, cross-sector solution.”

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / INSP

Rehousing the homeless: study reveals long-term support to rebuild lives

by Maureen Crane

The Conversation – London, UK,
02/08/2016

Homelessness in England has been a growing problem over the last five years. The number of people sleeping rough has doubled, and the number of homeless households seeking help from local authorities has also increased.

Homelessness can have a devastating impact on a person's health and well-being, and since the early 1990s successive governments made large investments in services to tackle the problem. But after 2010, funds were cut for many homelessness and housing support services. Several radical changes to housing and welfare policies were also introduced, which presented further challenges for formerly homeless people.

In an effort to assess the outcomes of rehousing homeless people, and learn how best to meet their longer-term support needs, the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) School for Social Care Research funded Rebuilding Lives. This study has sought to understand the experiences of 297 formerly homeless people, five years after they made the transition from hostels and other temporary accommodation into independent housing.

Colleagues at King's College London and I carried out the study, the largest of its kind in the UK. Our research followed up an earlier study, which investigated the experiences of 400 single homeless people over 18 months after they were resettled.

What we found

Once they are rehoused, many homeless people are able to rebuild their lives. After five years, many participants in our study had settled into their accommodation, and made considerable progress. Some had become involved in education, work-training programmes or had attained employment, and for many family and social relationships had improved. Several young people had started their own family.

But we found that a significant proportion remained vulnerable during the first few years, and required long-term support in order to maintain a tenancy and prevent a return to homelessness. By the end of the Rebuilding Lives study, 89 percent of our participants were housed, although 16 percent had become homeless at some time during the five years since they were resettled.

Living independently was not easy for



Homeless people beg for money on O'Connell Bridge in central Dublin November 16, 2010. Photo: REUTERS/Cathal McNaughton

them. Even after five years, some were still finding it hard to cope. One-quarter were struggling to look after their accommodation and manage everyday tasks, and were living in dirty or squalid conditions. Many of these individuals had mental health or substance misuse problems, and had little or no experience of living alone. A few were hoarding, and parts of their accommodation had become inaccessible.

For just over a third (35 percent) of our participants, their accommodation was in serious disrepair: they were experiencing problems with damp and mould, faulty heating or wiring, or damage caused by floods and leaks. People in both social housing and the private-rented sector were affected by poor living conditions.

Financial difficulties

Many formerly homeless people faced new financial demands immediately after they were resettled, as they tried to set up a home and rebuild their lives. When interviewed after five years, many of those who were housed were on low incomes (65 percent were living below the UK poverty line), and struggling to meet everyday living expenses. Around half ran short of money for food at times, and did not have enough money to heat their home.

Over the course of our study, the prevalence of debts among the participants gradually increased. Five years after being resettled, 75 percent owed money, including almost a third who had debts of more than £1,000. The debts were mainly due to cost of living expenses, such as rent, household bills and council tax. Young people aged under 25

years were most likely to have built up large debts – just over half of them (55 percent) owed £1,000 or more.

One of the key factors contributing to the participants' financial difficulties was the suspension or withdrawal of social security benefits. Three-quarters of our participants were reliant on such benefits and, at the time of their five-year interview, 24 percent of these had had their Jobseeker's Allowance (JSA) or Employment and Support Allowance (ESA) benefits suspended or stopped in the preceding 12 months.

In some cases, JSA was stopped because the participants missed appointments at the Job Centre or failed to attend training or apply for jobs. Some did not understand what they should do when their ESA – which was time-limited – ended, and failed to complete a new claim form.

Benefit sanctions led to great difficulties, as many people had no family or friends who could help them financially. For some people, this resulted in eviction for rent arrears as their housing benefit was also stopped – even though housing benefits should not be affected by JSA sanctions.

Many participants were keen to work, but finding a steady job with sufficient hours was problematic and contributed to financial difficulties. Some worked casually or under "zero-hours" contracts: their working hours were irregular and their income low.

Although zero-hours contracts may offer flexibility to employers and suit the circumstances of some people, such insecure hours can be problematic for

formerly homeless people who have no other source of income and are trying to re-establish themselves and live independently. Most study participants employed under zero-hours contracts would have preferred to work more hours, but the option was unavailable to them.

Building a home

Changes to the housing market in England over the last few years are also affecting the resettlement of homeless people. With a shortage of available social housing, single homeless people are now more likely to be resettled into the private rented sector.

Yet among the study participants, those resettled in the private rented sector had poorer housing outcomes than those who moved to local authority or housing association tenancies. They were more likely to have changed tenancy several times, and 36 percent of those resettled in the private rented sector became homeless again.

Factors contributing to their housing instability included fixed-term tenancy agreements, difficulties with rent payments, poor conditions in the accommodation, and conflicts with landlords regarding repairs.

After five years, 32 percent of participants were receiving housing-related support from services. People who received this support were predominantly those who had longer histories of homelessness, and health and substance misuse problems. Young people were least likely to receive support from services, yet they were also least likely to have had previous experience of living alone and managing a tenancy. People living in the private rented sector were also less likely than others to have received support.

Our study has shown that planned resettlement for homeless people works, and should be encouraged. But many homeless people require long-term tenancy support after they are rehoused. In many areas, there have been cuts to tenancy support services, and increasing pressures to restrict how long support can be provided. Yet taking into account the difficulties that many study participants were facing after five years, they are highly likely to need help for the foreseeable future, if further homelessness is to be prevented.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org/
The Conversation

Pope Francis grants rare interview to street papers

by Stijn Fens & Jan-Willem Wits
Straatnieuws – The Netherlands,
 11/06/2015

Pope Francis rarely grants interviews, but the opportunity to address international street papers was enough to persuade him that INSP was worth a spot in his busy diary. So, on 27 October, formerly homeless street paper seller Marc sat down with the leader of the world's 1.2 billion Catholics in the Vatican. The Straatnieuws vendor was accompanied by Dutch journalists Stijn Fens and Jan-Willem Wits. In a wide-ranging interview, the Holy Father opened up to them about his childhood in Buenos Aires, his life in Rome and his lack of football skills.

It is still early when we arrive at the service entrance of the Vatican, to the left of Saint Peter's Basilica. The Swiss Guards have been informed of our arrival, and let us pass. We head to the Domus Sanctae Marthae, because that is where Pope Francis lives. The Domus Sanctae Marthae is in all likelihood the most unique three-star hotel in the world. A large white building where cardinals and bishops reside while serving in or visiting the Vatican, it is also the official residence of the cardinals during the Conclave.

Here, too, they are expecting us. Two ladies behind the reception desk, just like in any hotel, kindly indicate a side door. The meeting room has already been prepared. It is a fairly large space, with a desk, a sofa, tables and chairs, and is the Pope's meeting room during the week. Then, the wait begins. Marc, the *Straatnieuws* salesman, is the most patient of us all, waiting, seated in his chair, for what will come.

Suddenly the Pope's official photographer appears. "The Pope is arriving," he whispers.

And before we know it, he walks into the room: Pope Francis, the spiritual leader of 1.2 billion Catholics. He is carrying a large white envelope. "Please, sit down, friends," he says with a gentle wave of his hand, "How nice to have you here." Close up, he gives the impression of a calm, friendly man, who is at the same time both energetic and precise. Once seated, he apologises for speaking Italian, rather than Dutch. We forgive him immediately.

INSP: *Straatnieuws* interviews always begin with a question about the street on which the interviewee grew up. Holy Father, what do you remember about that street? What images come into your mind when you recall the streets of your childhood?



His Holiness Pope Francis meets formerly homeless street paper vendor Marc during an exclusive interview for street papers at the Vatican. Photo: Frank Dries, *Straatnieuws* / INSP

Pope Francis: From when I was one year old to when I entered the seminary, I always lived on the same street. It was a simple neighbourhood in Buenos Aires, with one- and two-story homes. There was a small square, where we played football. I remember that I used to sneak out of the house to play football with the boys after school.

My father worked in a factory that was just a few hundred metres away. He was a bookkeeper. And my grandparents lived within 50 metres. We were all just a few steps from one another. I also remember the names of the people, when as a priest I went to give the sacraments, the final comfort for so many, who called for me and I went, because I loved them. These are the memories that first come to mind.

Did you play football, too?

Yes.

Were you good?

No. In Buenos Aires, those who played football like me are called *pata dura*, which means having two left legs! But I played anyway; often I was the goal-keeper.

How did your personal commitment to the poor begin?

Yes, so many memories come to mind. A woman who worked in our home three times a week to help my mother comes to mind. She helped with the laundry, for example. She had two children. They were Italian, and had survived the war; they were very poor, but they were very good people. And I have never forgotten that woman. Her poverty struck me.

We were not rich; normally we made it to the end of the month, but not much

more. We didn't own a car, we didn't go on vacations or things like that. But she often needed even the most basic items. They didn't have enough, and so my mother gave her things. She eventually went back to Italy, and then later she returned to Argentina. I found her again when I was the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, and she was already 90. I was able to assist her until her death at the age of 93.

One day, she gave me a medal of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, which I still carry with me every day. This medal – which is also a memento – is very good for me. Would you like to see it?

[With a bit of difficulty, Pope Francis manages to pull out the medal, now completely discoloured after years of use.]

With this, every day I think of her, and of how she suffered from poverty. And I think of all the others who have suffered. I wear it, and I use it to pray...

What is the Church's message for those who are homeless? What is the concrete meaning of Christian solidarity for them?

Two things come to mind. Jesus came in to our world without a home, and he chose poverty. Then, the Church seeks to embrace us all, and says that it is a right to have a roof over your head. Popular movements work toward the three Spanish "T's": *trabajo* [work], *techo* [roof] and *tierra* [land]. The Church teaches that every person has the right to these three T's.

You often call for heightened attention for the poor and for refugees. Are you not afraid that this might lead to a sort of overload in the media and in society in general?

We all have the temptation – when we have to face an issue that is not pretty, that is difficult to talk about – to say: "Oh, let's not talk about this anymore: this thing is just too difficult." I understand that the possibility of overload exists, but I do not fear it. I must continue to speak about the truth and about the way things are.

It is your duty?

Yes, it is my duty. I feel it inside me. It is not a commandment, but as individuals we all must do so.

Do you not fear that your support for the homeless and other groups plagued by poverty might be exploited politically? How can the Church speak out so that it has influence and, at the same time, manage to steer clear of political posturing?

There are paths that lead to errors at that point. I would like to call attention to two temptations. The Church must speak the truth and also with a testimony: the testimony of poverty. The believer who speaks of poverty or of the homeless, but who lives a life of luxury: that will not do. This is the first temptation.

The second temptation is making agreements with governments. Certainly agreements can be made, but they must be clear agreements, transparent agreements. For example, we manage this building, but the accounts are all closely controlled, in order to avoid corruption. Because the temptation for corruption is always present in public life, both political and religious. I remember once that I saw, with great pain, when Argentina, under the military regime, entered into war with Great Britain over the Falkland Islands, that people donated items to charity, and I saw many people, including Catholics, who were responsible for distributing those things to the needy, and who instead took those items home for themselves. The danger for corruption is always present.

Once I put a question to an Argentine Minister, an honest man – one who stepped down from his position because he could not agree with certain things that were not sufficiently transparent. I asked him: When you send assistance, whether it is in the form of meals, clothing, or funds, to the poor and to the indigent, of what you send, how much of it arrives to those who need it, of the money and materials items that are sent? He said to me: 35 percent. Which means that 65 per cent is lost. That is corruption: a bit for me, another bit for me.

see POPE FRANCIS, page 7

Pope Francis grants rare interview to street papers

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Do you believe that up to now under your pontificate you have been able to achieve a change in mentality, for example in politics?

I am not sure how to respond. I don't know. I do know that some have said that I was a communist. But that's a category that is a bit antiquated [he laughs]. Perhaps today we use different words to say that...

Marxist, socialist...

They've said all those, too.

The homeless have financial problems, but they cultivate their own freedom. The Pope has no material needs, but he is considered by some to be a prisoner of the Vatican. Do you ever wish you could trade places with the homeless?

I remember the book by Mark Twain, *The Prince and the Pauper*, when you can eat every day, you have clothes, a bed to sleep in, a desk to work on and nothing is lacking. You also have friends. But Mark Twain's prince lives in a golden cage.

Do you feel free here at the Vatican?

Two days after having been elected Pope, I went to take possession of the papal apartment in the Apostolic Palace. It is not a luxurious apartment. But it is wide, and large... After having seen the apartment, it seemed to me to be a bit like an upside-down funnel, so large but with only one small door. That means being isolated. I thought to myself: I can't live here, simply for mental health reasons. It would not be good for me. At the beginning, it seemed a bit strange, but I asked to stay here, at the Domus Sanctae Marthae. And this is good for me, because I feel free here. I eat in the dining hall where all the guests eat. And when I am early, I eat with the staff. I meet people, I greet them, and this makes the golden cage is a bit less of a cage. But I miss the street.

Holy Father, [Straatnieuws vendor] Marc would like to invite you to come have a pizza with us. What do you say?

I would like to, but we wouldn't be able to manage it. Because the moment I leave here, the people would come to me. When I went out into the city to change the lenses in my glasses, it was seven o'clock in the evening. There was barely anybody in the streets. They drove me to the optician, and as I got out of the car, there was a woman who saw me and cried: "It's the Pope!" And

then I was inside, and all the people were outside...

Do you miss contact with people?

I don't miss it, because the people come here. Every Wednesday, I am in Saint Peter's Square for the General Audience, and sometimes I go to one of the local parishes: I am in contact with the people. For example, yesterday [26 October] more than 5,000 gypsies came to the Paul VI Audience Hall.

It is evident that you enjoy your appointments in St. Peter's Square during the General Audience...

It's true. Yes, it's true.

Your namesake Saint Francis embraced radical poverty, and even sold his gospel book. As Pope, and the Bishop of Rome, do you ever feel under pressure to sell the treasures of the Church?

That is an easy question. They are not the treasures of the Church, but rather the treasures of humanity. For example, if tomorrow I wanted to auction off Michelangelo's "Pietà," I couldn't, because it is not the property of the Church. It is located in a Church, but it belongs to all humanity. This is true for all the treasures of the Church. But we have begun to sell the gifts and other things that are given to me. And the proceeds from the sales go to Monsignor Krajewski, my Almoner [Archbishop Konrad Krajewski, who is in charge of distributing money to the poor]. And then there is the lottery. There were some cars that were sold or given away with a lottery, and the proceeds were used for the poor. There are some things that can be sold, and these are sold.

You do realise how the wealth of the Church might create this type of expectation?

Yes, if we were to make a catalogue of all the Church's possessions, we could think: the Church is very rich. But with the Concordat with Italy of 1929 on the Roman Question, the Italian government at the time offered the Church a large Roman park. The Pope at the time, Pius XI, said: No, I only want half a square kilometre, in order to guarantee the Church's independence. This

principle is still valid.

Yes, the Church possesses a great deal of real estate assets, but we use them to maintain the Church's structures and to fund the many works carried out in needy countries: hospitals, schools.

Yesterday, for example, I had €50,000 sent to the Congo for the construction of three schools in poor villages; education is so important for children. I went to the administration, I made the request, and the money was sent.

Let's talk about Holland. Have you ever been to our country?

Yes, once, when I was the Provincial Superior of the Jesuits in Argentina. I was passing through, during a trip. I went to Wijchen [in the east of the country], because that's where novitiate was, and I was also in Amsterdam for a day and a half, where I stayed at a Jesuit house. Of the country's cultural life I saw nothing, because there was no time.

That's why it might be a good idea if Holland's homeless were to invite you to visit our country. What do you think, Holy Father?

The doors are not closed to that possibility.

So, when the invitation arrives, you will consider it?

I will consider it. And now that Holland has an Argentinian queen [he laughs], who knows?

Do you perhaps have a special message for the homeless of our country?

I am not well acquainted with the specifics of the homeless in Holland. I would like to say that Holland is a developed country with a great deal of possibilities. I would ask Holland's homeless to continue to fight for the three T's.

Finally, Marc has a few questions as well. Speaking through an interpreter, he would like to know whether Pope Francis dreamt of being the Pope, even when he was a little boy?

[The Holy Father answers with a resolute "No."]

But I will tell you a secret. When I was little, there weren't many shops that sold things. What we had was a market,

where there was the butcher, the green-grocer, etc. I went with my mother and my grandmother to do the shopping. Once, when I was quite little, about four, someone asked me: "What do you want to do when you grow up?" And I answered: "A butcher!"

Marc: You were unknown to many until 13 March, 2013. Then, overnight, you became famous throughout the world. How was that experience for you?

It happened, and I was not expecting it. But I have not lost peace. And that is a grace from God. I don't really think about the fact that I am famous. I say to myself: Now you have an important position, but in 10 years nobody will know you anymore [he laughs]. You know, there are two types of fame: the fame of the "greats" – those who have done truly great things, such as Madame Curie – and the fame of the vain. But this second type of fame is like a soap bubble.

So, you say "I am here now and I have to do the best that I can" and "I will continue to work for as long as I can"?

Yes.

Holy Father, can you imagine a world without poverty?

I want a world without poverty. We need to fight for that. But I am a believer, and I know that sin is always within us. And there is always human greed, the lack of solidarity, the selfishness which creates poverty. That is why it is difficult for me to imagine a world without poverty.

If you think of the children exploited for slave labour, or of children exploited for sexual abuse. And another form of exploitation: killing children to remove their organs; organ trafficking. Killing children for their organs is greed.

That is why I don't know whether we will ever have a world without poverty, because there is always sin, and it leads to selfishness. But we must always fight... always.

We have finished. We thank the Pope for the interview. He thanks us as well, and says that he enjoyed our chat very much. Then he takes the white envelope that has been next to him on the sofa the whole time, and takes out a rosary for each of us. Photos are taken, and then Pope Francis bids us goodbye. As calm and relaxed as when he arrived, he walks out of the door, ready for his next appointment.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / Straatnieuws – The Netherlands

Art for all

by Annette Woywode

Hinz und Kunzt – Germany, 7/13/2015

Peter Claesson is beside himself. “You should have seen the faces of these men,” he says enthusiastically while talking over the phone about his experiences in La Línea, the Spanish city on the Gibraltar border of Spain. “They were so happy and proud!”

Together with internationally renowned street artist Victor Ash, eight homeless people have reformed a drab wall into an open-air painting in a deprived part of the city. Instead of grey cement there are now silhouettes of wild animals jumping off the bright white background. All day they had been working on it, explains Claesson. Again and again, passers-by stopped and admired their work. In their breaks they had breakfast and pizza, and at the end of the day these homeless men felt they had achieved something big.

Big certainly describes most of the works of art created with the help of *Art for All*. Whole facades of houses and even whole street blocks have been revamped by Peter Claesson. He started the project together with his wife Sharon in Spain, where the 53-year-old lives and runs a travel agency, after a long period of working for NGOs and the government as a development worker.

Art for All isn't just active in Spain; it has also left its mark in Jordan and



A multi-coloured villa in Seville – realized by Cristina Salas and Javier & Jaime Suárez from Ecuador. Photo: Waone, Interesni Kazki, Art for All, Tasso

Honduras, specifically in cities and areas that are poor and deprived. The project collaborates with renowned artists like Nelson Román or Nena Sánchez, bringing them together with local people to help rebuild their neighbourhoods.

It all began 20 years ago in Ecuador, when Claesson and his wife still lived in the capital, Quito. They both worked for the U.N., but felt their skills were underutilized. When they heard about the children who were living with their parents in prison, they decided to organise outdoor trips for the children. “But at the end the children had to return to their sad prison world,” Claesson

recalls. That's how the idea was born to paint the walls together with the inmates, to bring colour and life to their grey surroundings.

First it was only done inside the prison, but eventually it spread to the outside world – with the prisoners. The pair wrote “a lot of nice letters” to get the permission for the prisoners and even more letters were written to find sponsors for the project. In the end hundreds of walls in Quito were colourfully decorated. The impact was overwhelming and Claesson decided to take the idea to other parts of the world.

While most of the murals in Quito

have now faded, in other places *Art for All* has found success. In Seville's Polígono de San Pablo area, 43 artists, local residents and many volunteers created an outdoor “museum” in 2010, exhibiting sculptures and giant murals. Even today, the participating local residents still proudly show tourists around their neighbourhood, which before had little to offer apart from industrial and high rise estates.

Yet this project cost a great deal of money; approximately 120,000 Euros had to be raised. Other projects like the one in Amman only needed 3,000 Euros, as sponsors such as airlines, hotels and restaurants joined the cause. Claesson does the majority of the organizing: “I have a lot of energy,” he claims, “and a wonderful family who give me time and love.”

Claesson has a special vision for La Línea. The first piece of art is now complete and he is getting immersed in fundraising so the homeless can decorate more walls and plant trees. And at the end they shall open their own café – for all the visitors that will come and admire the open-air art. Claesson says: “We will do it! I can envision it before me. And when I see it, then it will happen.”

More information:
www.artforallintheworld.org.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / Hinz&Kunzt

Tribal women manage India's forests

continued from page 2

cashew orchards on tribal communities' hill-sloping farming land in 22 of the state's 30 districts.

When commercial operations began, landless farmers were promised an equal stake in the trade.

“But when the fruits came, they not only auctioned the plantations to outsiders, but officials also told us we were stealing the cashews – not even our goats could enter the orchards to graze,” Nayak recounts.

“Overnight we became illegal intruders in the forestland that we had lived in, depended on and protected for decades,” she laments.

With over 4,000 trees – each generating between eight and 10 kg of raw cashew, which sells for roughly 0.85 dollars per kilo – the government was making roughly \$34,000 a year from the 20-hectare plantation; but none of these profits trickled back down to the community.

Furthermore, the state corporation began leasing whole cashew plantations out to private bidders, who also kept the profits for themselves.

Following the amendment to the Forest Rights Act in 2012, women in the community decided to mobilise.

“When the babus [officials] who had secured the auction bid arrived we did not let them enter. They called the police. Our men hid in the jungles because they would be beaten and jailed but all they could do was threaten us women,” says Nayak.

“Later we nailed a board to a tree at the village entrance road warning anyone trespassing on our community forest that they would face dire legal consequences,” she adds. Once, the women even faced off against the police, refusing to back down.

In the three years following this incident, not a single bidder has approached the community. Instead, the women pluck and sell the cashews

to traders who come directly to their doorsteps.

Although they earn only \$1,660 dollars a year for 25,000 kg – about \$0.60 per kilo, far below the market value – they divide the proceeds among themselves and even manage to put some away into a community bank for times of illness or scarcity.

“Corporations' officials now come to negotiate. From requesting 50 percent of the profit from the cashew harvest if we allow them to auction, they have come down to requesting 10 percent of the income. We told them they would not even get one rupee – the land is for community use,” recounts 40-year-old Pramila Majhi who heads one of the women's protection groups that guards the cashew orchards.

It was a hard-won victory, but it has given hope to scores of other villages battling unsustainable development models.

Between 2000 and 2014, more than

25,000 hectares of forests in Odisha have been diverted for “non-forest use,” primarily for mining or other industrial activity.

In a state where 75 percent of the tribal population lives below the poverty line, the loss of forests is a matter of life and death.

According to the ministry of tribal affairs, the average earnings of a rural or landless family sometimes amount to nothing more than \$13 a month. With 41 percent of Odisha's women suffering from low body mass and a further 62 percent suffering from anemia, the forests provide much-needed nutrition to people living in abject poverty.

Rather than ride a wave of destructive development, tribal women are charting the way to a sustainable future, along a path that begins and ends amongst the tress in the quiet of Odisha's forests.

Source: www.streetnewsservice.org / IPS